

To Recollect the Future by oliversnape

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Summary

Hindsight is 20/20, but when Harry's last steps into the forest set him back further than he'd ever thought, he never realised how grateful he'd be to have Snape there to help too.

Notes

This will be a mentor fic, and though it does step backwards, it's not a usual time-travel story. I'm going to weave as much cannon into this as possible.

Chapter 1

A strong odour of moss, fallen evergreen and death invaded his nose; and a thin layer of damp forest dirt was stuck to his lips and the cold sweat on his cheek. A chill, one caused by dampness and fatigue, hard labour and a continued heightened sense of vigilance ran through his body with shivers and jerks of his limbs. His body, lighter than he remembered, was twisted in a way that staved off his muscle cramps- but only just. His arm started to prickle and ache, as it slowly lost feeling under the weight of his body. Harry Potter opened his eyes, disoriented in the evening dark of the forest and the overly large glasses on his face.

"It didn't hurt," he whispered, the dirt on the ground moving around his breath. "It didn't hurt, Sirius."

With as quiet of grunt as possible, he pulled himself up to look around, gauging his immediate threat level at zero. He could feel that his wand was in his pocket, his invisibility cloak under his shirt, and he wondered how long he'd been unconscious that Voldemort and the Death Eaters had left. Harry steadied himself and began to panic as he stood, noticing for the first time that his body was smaller than it had been when he'd gone to die in the forest. His clothes were the same, the mud, the small cuts on his hands and face, the scratches on his glasses, the map in his pocket. His size though - somehow he'd been shrunk, or gotten younger.

A raspy cough to his left startled him, and Harry whipped his wand out to point it at the black lump leaning against the tree off in the distance. Focusing his gaze, Harry recognized that it was actually a man, slumped against the tree and in sodden dark robes. A man who looked half dead, a wizard who'd...

"Snape!" Harry hissed, tripping over a tree root in his too-large shoes as he tried to reach the man. He landed with a soft 'oof' next to his professor, ignoring the dull pain in his knees as he used his small dirty fingers to raise Snape's head. There was a lot of blood on the man's collar, and dark patches across his chest and abdomen. Harry searched carefully, his wand drawn and episkey on his lips, but could not find any open wounds to cause the bleeding. Nagini's wounds were there, but they'd scabbed over. The black eyes opened suddenly without warning, and Harry stumbled back onto the forest floor in surprise. He suddenly realised where he was, back in the Forbidden Forest, younger than he could remember being, and staring at the intense gaze of a man he'd seen die.

"No, you're dead," Harry hoarsely whispered, never taking his gaze from Snape's. "It's not possible...I chose to come back..."

"Potter?" Snape hoarsely demanded, his wand steadily directed between Harry's eyes.

"Harry," was Harry's answer, his own wand also up. It was then that he noticed that Snape also looked younger, slightly healthier, and with fewer worry lines and creases on his face. The scowl, which had become all but permanent after fifth year, hadn't seemed to set yet.

Harry pulled his torn tan jacket tighter around himself as he scrutinized Snape, as if he was seeking further protection.

"What were the last words I said to you?" Snape asked, never wavering his wand, but sitting up straighter against the tree.

"Look at me," Harry immediately answered. "Where was the sword of Gryffindor when I got it?"

Snape seemed to consider him and nod, before finally answering.

"In the forest of Dean, under a pond," he answered, lowering his wand. "You nearly drowned retrieving it."

"That's right," Harry said, more to himself as he slowly stood up. He looked down at his body, at the jeans pooling around his feet and his inner black fleece jacket folding over itself. It felt like he was back in Dudley's clothes.

Snape was ignoring everything Harry was mumbling, and instead was just staring.

"What have you done?" the voice was calm and emotionless, but Snape's eyes showed a brewing storm.

"Nothing," Harry stammered, hating how his voice was so high pitched. He rubbed at his scar instinctively, surprised and yet not that it was still there.

"Potter, you're the size of an eleven year old," Snape sneered, standing up and dusting his trousers off. He did nothing about the bloodstains on his collar or robes.

"Why are you alive?" Harry demanded, taking his glasses off and holding up his wand at them. He'd forgotten the spell to resize them, though, and merely pointed them at Snape. "I watched you die!"

Snape's reply was cut off by a snapping twig to the far right.

"Se-Se-Severus?"

It was Professor Quirinus Quirrell, sounding nervous and twitchy, just like he had the very first day Harry had met him.

Harry lost all of the colour in his face and dropped his glasses to the forest floor.

"No," Harry gulped, shaking his head violently.

"Muffliato," Snape cast, moving toward Harry. They could still hear Quirrell wandering through the path.

"Potter," Snape tried, snapping his fingers in front of Harry's face. Harry's eyes jumped up to the dark ones, not even registering the concern in them or the streaks of coagulated blood under Snape's chin. Harry's body started to shake, and he could feel his heart racing.

"No, I can't be back here. I can't do this again," Harry said, hugging himself as he continued to shake his head. His voice got louder, and he nearly fell over as he tried to back up in his overly large shoes. He felt a panic rising up within him, acidic in his throat as his memories rushed at him and everything he'd gone through in the past seven years twisted and pulled at him again.

Snape's hands gripped his shoulders, strong and unyielding against Harry's trembling.

"Harry, stop," Snape ordered, his voice low and calm. Harry didn't hear it, though he was somewhat able to focus on Snape. The graveyard. Voldemort would try to kill him in the graveyard again. And he'd have to face the dragon in the Triwizard tournament, he'd have to deal with everyone hating him, and Dumbledore, he'd have to see Dumbledore die...

Rough black wool scraped against his cheeks as everything went dark. The peat smell here was added to by the coppery scent of blood, dried but still strong enough to turn his stomach slightly. Heavy weight was on his shoulders, a cool metal button was pressing against his cheek, and Harry then realised that Snape was actually hugging him.

"Stop, Harry," Snape murmured.

Harry still shook, his body hitching with his breaths as he stayed held against the warm man in front of him, the man who for years he'd thought had never been capable of any sort of softer emotions. He was offering comfort though, and Harry thought that if he could just convince Snape that he couldn't physically live through it all again, the nightmare of being back in first year would go away.

"Why are you doing this?" Harry asked instead, trying his hardest to blink away the wetness in his eyes. He was an eighteen-year-old man, but he was falling apart. He couldn't remember the last time he'd broken down, and it left him feeling utterly exposed.

Snape pushed him back a little and looked down at Harry, his hair falling forward a bit. Off in the distance, they heard Quirrell calling Snape's name again.

"A panicked Potter will not help figure out what brought us here," Snape said, logic superseding any other reason he may have had.

Harry sniffed discreetly and picked up his glasses.

"I'm not..." Harry said, his hands and fingers feeling clammy.

"You are," Snape corrected. He didn't seem to be angry though, and Harry thought that it was a mark of everything that they'd gone through in seven years that Snape seemed to understand his panic. "We could be much worse off, Potter."

"You do remember everything too, then?" Harry asked, looking around the clearing as if he still didn't believe where he was.

"Everything," Snape confirmed, his wand moving over his throat as the blood stains slowly disappeared.

Snape cancelled the muffliato, checking the watch that he had on his wrist under his long sleeved robes. Harry thought it odd that he'd never noticed the watch before, or seen Snape checking it. Snape cleared his throat and looked up, as if confirming that Harry was composed enough to stay quiet when Quirrell found them. Harry shoved his glasses up his nose again, and looked at Snape with bright green eyes.

"Thanks," Harry said, gesturing between them. "And, err, sorry."

"I did not expect to see you again after giving you my memories," Snape commented, seeming to be rather uncomfortable. "It would seem that after our experiences in the past seven years, a show of comfort would not be amiss for a fellow Order member."

"Severus? Whe-whe-where are you?" Quirrell asked again, sounding very close to them this time.

Snape twirled angrily toward the voice, and then back to look at Harry.

"All right?" he demanded in a quiet voice.

"Yeah," Harry muttered. He'd already yanked his cloak out, and was partially invisible. He could hold it together while Snape talked to Quirrell. He remembered Quirrell as not being much of a threat, not after his varied experience with a full grown and human Voldemort.

"Hide, Potter," Snape growled, a low order. "But do not leave this clearing."

"Wait!" Harry hissed, only his head showing. He felt slightly less panicked now, more on alert, because he knew that no matter what, Snape was there to help too. "How do we know there's not another version of us here? Doesn't that happen with time turners?"

Snape appeared to give this only a second's considering, as they heard more crashing through the brush.

"I would have found myself by now," Snape judged, steeling himself to meet Quirrell.

Harry shrugged at that, and disappeared fully under the cloak.

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Snape straightened his robes, masking his surprise as he reached up and twisted the cricks out of his shoulders. The missing seven years made a difference, and his shoulders weren't nearly as sore as they'd been only that morning. Seven years...the last he could remember was lying on the dirty shack floor, the snake slithering away from him and an intense pain pulsing in every nerve. And then the boy had appeared, with his impossibly green eyes and actual care in which he'd held Snape's hand as he'd lain dying. Snape pushed the thoughts aside, crossing his arms and making himself look imposing. He needed to deal with Quirrell at the moment, and they'd work out the accidental time travel later. He and Potter - what a mess.

Quirrell stumbled toward the clearing, crashing through the underbrush like a wild boar as he stammered to himself.

Snape waited, in the shadows, until Quirrell was close enough to grab. Potter was standing off to the side against a beech tree (if the little twerp hadn't moved), and Snape swiftly caught Quirrell and pushed him up against a strong oak tree.

"Good evening, Quirrell. We're going to have a little chat," Snape said, his voice low and menacing. He remembered having the meeting with Quirrell all those years ago, but not quite what he'd said.

"But...but...why here, of of of all p-p-places Severus?"

"Because students aren't supposed to know about the Philosopher's Stone," Snape sneered, his memory sharpening into clarity.

"The Phil-Phil...they don't!" Quirrell insisted, pushing against Snape.

Snape pushed back, keeping Quirrell sufficiently pinned against the tree. He took malicious pleasure knowing that the Dark Lord was somewhere in the back of Quirrell's head, and ensured to knock it at least once against the massive tree.

"I don't trust you, Quirrell. You do not want me as your enemy. I expect that your little enchantment will be ready to protect the Stone shortly, and that you will not lay any sort of trap with it."

"Se-Se-Severus I would n-never!"

"See that you don't," Snape said, stepping back and releasing Quirrell. "We shall have another conversation shortly, to ensure your loyalties lie with the right side."

Snape raised an eyebrow at him, and watched with no short amusement as Quirrell stumbled away. He resisted the urge to give any indication that he was aware of the Dark Lord's presence. Snape knew it was best now to keep his cards close, something he'd have to import to Potter. It wouldn't do for either of them to reveal their knowledge prematurely.

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Once the cloak was removed, Harry angrily resized his clothes with slashes of his wand.

"I'm back in first year, and you're still the evil potions professor" Harry whispered, his angry disbelief evident. "What's happened to us?"

Snape clutched his arm and pulled him close, so they could talk quieter and not be overheard by anyone roaming about the forest. He seemed to be oddly pleased that Harry was together enough to be angry.

"I don't know what's happened," Snape answered, lips tight and eyes flashing. Harry struggled a bit but Snape squeezed his arm harder. "Something obviously has and we will not find the answer in the Forbidden Forest."

"But," Harry said, ready to argue back. He still couldn't get his arm free.

"You have a detention tonight, Potter, for spying on myself and Professor Quirrell."

Outrage sparked on Harry's face, and Snape leaned closer.

"Think, Potter!" Snape hissed. "You will come to the dungeons, the warded dungeons, and we will discuss this further."

Understanding dawned in Harry's eyes, and Snape let him go.

"Transfigured your clothing into something proper, and do not give yourself away. I trust you can find my office once again."

"What? Just go back to school as normal?"

"Yes," Snape said, unsuccessfully trying to spell away the blood on his robes. "You must make an appearance. Do not tell anyone what has happened. Not even your little friends."

"Fine, sir," Harry grumbled. "See you at eight."

Harry turned to stomp off, but Snape stopped him.

"Seven. We have a lot to discuss; it will be an all night detention."

The black eyes were as focused as ever, and Harry saw the same tiredness in them that he felt. They may have ended up back in 1991, but the war was still very fresh on their minds.

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Harry stood outside the portrait for five minutes, stammering in embarrassment at the Fat Lady.

"I have no idea what the password is," he admitted, scratching the hastily conjured quidditch uniform he wore.

"Hit with a bludger once too many times, dearie?" the Fat Lady teased, holding up a corked bottle of something.

"Can you ask someone to come out?" Harry crossly muttered.

"Harry!" Ron yelped, coming up the stairway. "Where have you been?"

Harry turned and felt his breath hitch, seeing Ron, Hermione, George, and *Fred* walking toward him. Hermione and Ron had books in their arms, likely from the library, but George and Fred were looking as innocent as they ever got.

Ron's face was so small, his cheeks reddish and clashing with his orange-red hair as his eyes widened with the importance of what he had to say. Hermione, holding a book that looked to be more than half of her body size, smiled widely at him beneath frizzy hair. Harry felt a rush

of horrible guilt revolting in his stomach, guilt for everything he knew they'd have to go through in the future.

"What's the matter Harry?" George asked, ruffling Harry's hair.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Fred chimed in.

"Yeah," Harry trailed off. God, their voices hadn't even fully deepened yet. "I got a detention," he blurted.

"What?" Ron demanded, in outrage. "From who? We weren't even in class!"

"Pixie wings," Hermione told the portrait. They all clambered through, and Harry felt a huge rush of homesickness being back in the common room. The fireplace was merrily crackling, and chairs were filled with students half asleep as they drank hot chocolates and tea, the twins were whooping as they ran up the stairs, and Percy was muttering to himself as he inspected the notice board.

"Harry," Hermione's voice broke through his thoughts. "What are you looking at?"

"And what'd you get detention for?"

"For spying on Snape," Harry said, remembering to sound excited. He couldn't believe back in first year they'd been so concerned about Snape stealing the Philosopher's Stone. It just seemed so ridiculous now, compared to everything they'd gone through since then. "All night detention, something to do with collecting ingredients."

Ron gave Harry a disgusted look.

"But I did find out something about Quirrell," Harry whispered, pulling Ron and Hermione over to a warm cushy chair by the fire. He was amazed that they could almost all fit in it at the same time.

By the time he'd finished spinning his tale on what he'd 'overheard' about the Stone and its protections, Ron had decided he was brave and stupid for spying on Snape alone, and Hermione had lectured him. He couldn't think up a viable excuse for such a rash action, but neither Ron nor Hermione seemed to require one. Harry had just enough time to take a hot shower before going down to the dungeons, luxuriating in the steam, heat, and clean bathroom. The year of camping had been acceptable, and they'd made the best of it, but Hogwarts would always be home. It certainly felt like it was welcoming him back.

Changing into warm clothes for the evening, Harry checked the pockets of his war-torn clothes. They'd been discreetly transfigured back -and shrunken -, and Harry found his Marauder's Map folded up in his back pocket. He didn't know if the twins had a copy in this world or not, but he did have a valid excuse to go to the dungeons at least. It had been bothering him since the clearing though, and Harry unfolded the map and held it up against the loo wall.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," Harry whispered. He could hear an upper year boy coming into the washroom, but he'd chosen a stall furthest from the door and doubted he'd be bothered. Making sure he still had enough time to run downstairs, Harry scanned the map. Just as he'd suspected - only one Snape was on the map, in his office. And only one Harry. They hadn't simply travelled back in time like his previous adventure with a time turner.

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Harry followed the small winding staircase he'd been rushed down in fifth year to get to Snape's office. None of the Slytherins were about, and it took Harry a minute to realize that he felt so uneasy because the castle wasn't. Voldemort hadn't returned yet - the castle was mostly safe. He knocked three times on Snape's office door, before it was yanked open and he was pulled through. Only one candle was lit in the room, and Harry reacted instantly to seeing Snape's face only in shadows.

"Fodio!" Harry reacted, wrenching his arm away as Snape hissed at the stinging jinx. Both ended up at wand point again.

"What memories did I see when I used legilimency against you?" Harry interrogated.

Snape bared his teeth angrily, but answered. "Me as a child and my parents arguing. What curse did you attempt to murder Draco Malfoy with?"

"I didn't," Harry immediately denied, but Snape jabbed his wand against Harry's cheek to demand an answer. "Sectumsempra."

Satisfied, Snape threw a strong locking charm at the office door and spun back to the shadows, not checking to see if Harry was following.

There was a narrow recessed door on the far side of Snape's bookcases, out of sight to almost anyone who'd entered the office. Harry had certainly never seen it before, and he'd been in Snape's office plenty of times.

"I have yet to discern how you managed to send us back seven years, Potter," Snape said, with no small amount of resentment. He stalked down a narrow stone hallway that was lit with two sconces. There was a plain coat rack at the far end, onto which Snape had hung two outer cloaks and a thick grey scarf. Harry stared at it, unsettled by the domesticity. Even after seeing the man's memories, and evidence that Snape had, in fact, been a normal human child like himself, Harry's brain still stupidly assumed that Snape slept and lived in his robes.

"I didn't do anything," Harry insisted, following Snape into a warm living room. It was like a different world from Snape's office. The walls were painted a dark grey-blue colour, but there were lots of lights and the light wood furniture felt sparse and almost airy. Paintings and pictures covered the walls, a worn Slytherin pennant hung over the doorway to what looked to be a small kitchenette. There was a scuffed and well used leather chesterfield in the room, a matching armchair by the fireplace, a rattan foot rest that looked as if it had been used every day of its life, and a small writing table in the corner covered with books, a robe, three candlesticks, and various scrolls. No less than three tea cups sat on random book shelves and the side table next to the chair, and Harry was unexplainably pleased to find that nearly every

book in the room had little scraps of paper, parchment, ribbon, and in one case a thin stirring ladle, sticking out from it.

"Sit," Snape ordered, pointing to the chesterfield. It had a knit blanket haphazardly thrown on it, as if Snape had used the couch for a kip not that long ago. Harry continued to inspect the room, watching the mugs lazily float back to the kitchenette.

"You will not breathe a word to anyone, alive or dead, about my living space," Snape said, fixing him with a stern look.

"No, no of course not," Harry said, wiping his hands on his jeans. He'd managed to get most of the dirt off them, but the bloodstains were slightly more resistant to cleaning. Which made sense, when Harry thought about it. Blood magic was very strong. He'd have to ask Snape what spells he'd used on his robes.

"Tea?" Snape asked, pulling a small pewter pot down from the fireplace mantel.

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said, still looking around the room. It was disconcerting being back at such a peaceful Hogwarts, and his body was thrumming for him to go out in search of Quirrell and to destroy Voldemort.

Snape knelt down and spoke into the fire, ordering some sort of pasta dish for them both. Harry's stomach grumbled loudly, as if to remind Harry just how hungry it was. The room was quite warm though, and it felt like the Gryffindor common room. Like it was private and cosy and a place that he could let his guard somewhat down in.

"What is the last thing you remember, during the battle?" Snape bluntly asked, turning around and setting down a battered tray on the ottoman. The house elves had provided them with two steaming dishes of lasagne, some buttery garlic bread, and a large teapot with a hot pink tea cosy covering it. They'd not provided any cups or cutlery though, so Snape held his wand up to summon them. Two matching mugs appeared - that looked like they'd come from a dish set at Marks and Spencer's - along with a small bowl of sugar and a tiny cup of milk. There was also a plate of what looked to be plain tea biscuits from a store-bought package. To keep his hands busy, Harry began to prepare his own tea.

"Voldemort killed me," Harry answered just as matter of factly, catching Snape's wince. "I ended up at a very misty King's Cross with Dumbledore. He said I could go on, or go back to face Voldemort."

Snape's intensely focused eyes were unnerving, and Harry spooned out some sugar into his mug. He noticed tiny tea shaped clumps in the sugar bowl, the result of a tea-dampened spoon used to scoop the sugar out, and realised that Snape likely used the sugar bowl every day for his own tea.

"Did you specifically wish to go back here? To 1991?" Snape urgently asked. He had his own plate in his lap and was cutting into the pasta, causing waves of steam to escape and encircle his gaunt face.

"No," Harry softly said, shaking his head. "I knew exactly what I was going back to, and it was the only thing on my mind. Voldemort and a forest of Death Eaters."

Snape sat back to think about this, his eyebrows narrowed in thought and his thin fingers wrapped around his tea mug as he picked it up. Harry found it slightly interesting that Snape never took his spoon out of his tea as he drank it. How did the man not stab himself in the eye?

"I experienced something similar," Snape finally said, as if he'd just come to the decision that Harry was worthy of hearing it. "I met your mother, at the park near Spinner's End."

Harry's eyes snapped into focus, but Snape's gaze was at the fire sparking in his fireplace.

"You saw my mum?" Harry asked, the jealousy seeping into his voice. He'd been in the middle of cutting up his own food, but his knife and fork stayed suspended above a thick covering of melted cheese and noodles.

"Albus Dumbledore was the main guidance and influence in your life," Snape firmly said. "I believe that is why he was there for you."

Still momentarily stung that he'd not gotten to see his own parents, Harry took a bite of dinner and looked away. Snape was right, Dumbledore had been the near constant guidance in his life, and had looked out for Harry in a somewhat twisted way, more so than his relatives had ever done.

"Did you choose to come back here?" Harry asked, taking a sip of tea and not caring much that he nearly burnt his tongue.

Snape gave him a withering look.

"You can't possibly imagine I want to experience all that again."

Harry yawned, and reached down to kick off his shoes. The couch was comfortable, but he was too short to reach the ground and he wanted his feet up. For a multitude of reasons he felt safe, ensconced here in the dungeons with Snape. Snape, who probably understood more about him than most other people.

"Have you seen the headmaster at all, since our return?" Snape asked. He was treating Harry as an adult - despite Harry's physical appearance - and it made Harry feel like he was finally a worthy colleague from the Order.

"I've not," Harry shook his head. "Just the twins, Ron, and Hermione."

"I have," Snape muttered, taking a large bite of his lasagne. He looked like he was mentally reviewing the conversation he'd had with Dumbledore.

"Did he know that we've come back?"

Snape shook his head slowly, and Harry took another bite of lasagne as he waited.

"He realised that I was tense. He commented on it, and made some banal remark regarding your skills at today's match. However, I do not think he knows that we are from a different time."

Snape looked satisfied at this summary, but Harry was staring at him.

"You didn't tell him? I thought you trusted Dumbledore. He always told me he trusted you with his life."

Snape took a rather loud inhalation of breath, and closed his eyes. Harry could have kicked himself once he reviewed what he'd said.

"He did," said Snape. He leaned toward Harry though, pointing a sauce-covered fork at him. "However, Potter, remember this. Never give anyone your complete and utter submission. Always question in your mind if they have your best interests in theirs."

"Alright," Harry quietly said. It was a very solid piece of advice, and Harry was grateful for it. He was having a hard time picturing Dumbledore as anything but the grandfatherly-like old man he was so used to, but even Harry knew that Dumbledore didn't always choose the wisest course of action when it came to him.

"Back in my first year, Dumbledore said something which has always stuck out to me," Harry started, taking a sip of tea. "He said that to the intelligent mind, or well sorted, or something like that, death is but the next great adventure."

The sour look that came upon Snape's face would have been comical if Harry wasn't sitting close enough to the man to see the vein under his eye pulsing with annoyance.

"Naturally he would see it that way," Snape grumbled. "However, if I am not mistaken, you were one step away from winning the war when we arrived here?"

Harry nodded, and Snape looked satisfied.

"Not even the headmaster would send us back in time when you were that close to ending the Dark Lord."

Harry considered that, and Snape divided up the garlic bread for them both. It was thick and cheesy, with a tastefully light spread of garlic on it.

"Maybe he did it so that less people would die. Now that I know about the horcruxes, and where they are - "

"Horcruxes?" Snape asked, nearly dropping his plate. "*That's* what you were searching for last year?"

Harry gave him a tired look.

"Seven of them."

Snape muttered what Harry thought was likely quite a curse in Latin.

"I had suspected," Snape muttered, standing up and stalking toward the kitchenette.

"I didn't think he wouldn't tell you," Harry offered as a feeble excuse. Harry knew that Dumbledore had always like to play his cards close, but he'd never thought that Snape wouldn't be told about the horcruxes.

Snape came back out, with what looked like a large bar of Honeyduke's milk chocolate.

"The ring?" Snape asked. He already knew, but Harry just figured he wanted confirmation.

"The ring," Harry nodded. "The diary, a cup, a locket, the snake, a diadem."

Snape was quick to count though, and tapped his foot impatiently.

Harry raised his small finger and pointed to the scar on his forehead.

"The scar," Snape confirmed, his voice laced with defeated irritation.

Neither said anything for a few moments, and Harry put his empty plate on the coffee table. His belly was warm, and he was feeling tired. He pulled the blanket over himself again, watching as Snape furiously worked through the information Harry had given him.

"Are you entirely certain that those horcruxes exist, and are what is keeping the Dark Lord alive?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded.

"I saw - they're interactive. I know they're bits of his soul."

"Perhaps we have been returned, because they have been destroyed," Snape thought aloud. He flicked his wand once at the fire, raising the flames again.

Harry figured Snape meant a time quest of some sort, almost like when Dudley was playing one of his video games. He had to complete certain smaller quests in order to continue along the main storyline of the game.

"We can find out," Harry said, tucking his feet under the blanket. "There's a horcrux here at Hogwarts."

"Where?" Snape coolly asked, his tea halfway up to his mouth. He didn't sound remotely surprised.

"In the Room of Requirement," Harry answered slowly. He was comfortable on the couch and couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. Was it just yesterday they'd broken into Gringotts? He shook his head and looked back at Snape.

"It'll take a bit to find, but it's there."

For the first time since Harry had woken up, he saw a small smirk form on Snape's face.

"The come and go room, of course."

"You knew about it, too?" Harry asked. He reached over to grab a biscuit, noticing that it looked just like the plain digestive biscuits Aunt Petunia served her guests.

"A few people from every generation of Hogwarts students find it," Snape said patronizingly, as if he couldn't believe that Harry was dumb enough to assume he'd been the first.

"I figured," Harry replied, dunking another biscuit in his tea and not taking Snape's baiting. "The way Dumbledore spoke of it, he made it sound like it was a brand new addition to the castle."

Snape snorted somewhat derisively. "Cheap motivational trick."

"How so?" Harry asked, peering curiously up at Snape. The clock on the mantel gave a shudder as it clicked over for the hour, signalling eight o'clock. Harry glanced around the room, but didn't see any other timepiece. "You don't have a magical clock? Nothing to signal school times?"

Snape scowled, and snatched his biscuit plate back.

"I have been teaching at this school for nearly twenty years," he scornfully said. "It's a cheap trick because it made students like yourself think they were the first to discover everything. And it made you try harder to impress him."

Harry swallowed at that, pointing his wand at the fireplace and beefing up the fire. Dumbledore had been gone for almost a year, but of course Snape would be the one that could strike a horrible pinch in Harry's heart.

A somewhat uneasy silence descended on the room, and Snape seemed to be looking anywhere but at Harry. He finally cleared his throat, and stacked the plates on the table.

"Will you recognize if the horcrux is live or not?" Snape asked, sounding slightly gruff.

"Yeah," Harry immediately replied. The familiar ache in the front of his forehead from Voldemort's presence wasn't there, but Harry had a strong feeling that he'd not lost the connection.

"If we find the diadem tonight, we'll know."

"How long will it take to find the horcruxes?" Snape asked, leaning back into his chair.

Harry had never noticed that Snape's suit, up-close, was so black that it almost appeared to have a purple tinge to it in the right light.

"How do you fancy a year of camping?"

The look Snape gave him was almost worth the horrible first year potions classes Harry had had to endure.

"Absolutely not," Snape spat, once some colour had returned to his sallow cheeks. "With my intelligence and your...memory, the horcruxes - if they exist - will be destroyed in less than six months."

"You're joking," Harry said, dropping the tight hold he'd had on his blanket. "They're not exactly easy to find!"

"It's February twenty-second," Snape said, raising his wand to summon a calendar and ignoring Harry's objection. "You will return to your relatives at the end of June."

"I'm not going back there," Harry protested, leaning over to see the calendar. Snape had things scribbled on it that Harry was surprised to see. Medical check up. Tax bill to be paid. "I'm eighteen years old."

"You're eleven, now," Snape said, with a cruel smile.

"I will find a way to go back to our time," Harry determinedly said. "I refuse to go back to the Dursleys, and have to grow up again."

"You may not have a choice," Snape maliciously reminded him. "We have yet to ascertain how we arrived back here."

Harry snapped his mouth shut, conceding mentally that Snape had a point. In any case, it was a useless argument at the moment.

"Let's just see if the horcrux is still there," Harry suggested. He was getting too comfortable on the couch, and knew that in fifteen more minutes he'd likely fall asleep.

....

I need to access the place where everything is hidden, Harry thought, closing his eyes as he walked back and forth along the seventh floor corridor. It was not yet nine, and while the upper students didn't have curfew yet, the hallway was empty. Snape leaned against the wall near Harry, his arms crossed and his fingers tapping against his forearms. The tapping slowed as the imposing and heavily carved door started to appear out of the wall stones.

Harry pushed his way inside, this time fairly sure that Snape was following him. The second set of footsteps behind him confirmed it, and Harry looked around at the messy room. The last time he'd seen it the room had been engulfed in flames.

"Where is it?" Snape asked, moving about the room in a way that made Harry think he'd used the space to hide something before.

"It's on Malfoy's vanishing cabinet," Harry answered, climbing over to the spot where the old ugly bust was. He remembered the panicked rush he'd been in when he'd placed the bust on top of the vanishing cabinet, ugly wig and old tiara and all. Instead of reaching for the tiara, Harry cracked open the cabinet just enough that his body blocked the view from inside. It was empty though, and Harry felt a flash of disappointment before he remembered that his

special potions book was likely in the potions classroom itself. How he'd get it back without Snape knowing was another matter.

"There it is," Harry needlessly said, nodding upward. Snape made no move to reach for it.

"Well?" Snape asked, his voice seemingly empty of emotion. "You said you'd recognize if it were live."

Harry turned to look at Snape, curious suddenly to know if Snape would feel the connection. He carried the Dark Mark, and Harry figured that might be enough.

"It's in there," Harry said, feeling the bile-like presence from the diadem. He suspected the only reason he'd not noticed it in sixth year was his sole focus on hiding the potions book.

Snape did reach this time, with his wand, and levitated the diadem off the statue.

"Perhaps we should return it to my lab to study it," Snape said.

"That's probably for the best," Harry confirmed. "They like to try to kill whomever is trying to destroy it."

Snape cut him a quick look and lead them out of the room, the diadem disillusioned and floating in front of them.

...

Snape's quarters were still very warm from the fire, and Harry was pleasantly surprised that Snape's lab was as well. He clearly remembered the freezing potions classes in the dungeons during winter, but it seemed like Snape liked his own living space to be rather warm.

"Touch it," Harry said, watching Snape carefully place the diadem on an empty workbench.

"Potter," Snape evenly replied, as if he were talking to a moron. "You said not moments ago that it would try to kill whomever wanted to destroy it. I assure you that I very much wish to destroy this."

"You don't have anything to destroy it with. I want to see if you see what I do when you touch it," Harry reasoned. He was sitting on a stool, his short legs swinging in the air below him.

Rolling his eyes at Harry, Snape reached out and very lightly touched the diadem with his fingers. He remained still, his eyes opened and focused at Harry, and his lips in a low scowl.

"The only difference I feel is a slight elevation of malevolent magic," Snape said. "Any first year student casting a strong enough jinx can cause an identical reaction."

"No, you -," Harry jumped down off the stool and strode forward, reaching for Snape's hand before he thought too much about doing it. "You have to see."

Harry touched the tip of the diadem, one of the jewels, and let out a strangled gasp as a menacing darkness rippled through his body and images flashed through his mind. He could

tell Snape was experiencing the same, as Snape's body was tense and his fingers were gripping into Harry's skin. A dark forest appeared before him in his mind, a Muggle peasant in work-worn clothes walking along a path with a basket of mushrooms, a glittering diadem in a tree, a cold malicious smile, dark eyes, a voice they both knew, and a green flash as the Muggle fell. A feeling of horror and damnation as a grey shadow grew darker and darker.

Harry staggered back against the stool, dropping the diadem to the floor and feeling very light-headed. Snape wasn't faring much better, clutching at his arm and his mouth slack as he stared at the tarnished diadem.

"I think the horcruxes remember me," Harry gasped, lowering himself to the floor. He lasted all of six seconds sitting up, before everything went black.

Chapter 2

Harry woke to warm candlelight by his face and a pungent sharp odour very close by. The ammonia scent was extremely off-putting, and he twisted away from the blurry blue vial it was contained in. Snape came into focus as the one holding the vial, and he halted Harry's movements by putting his hand on Harry's chin.

"Stay put," Snape ordered, moving Harry's head slightly to the side and peering at him. He seemed satisfied with what he saw, and sat back a little from Harry's range of vision. He was on a small wooden stool, and Harry realised that he himself was actually on a small red cot, behind the chesterfield. He had the couch's knit blanket covering himself, and his shoes and glasses were missing. His jacket was draped over the couch, and the shirt he was wearing smelled as if someone had done a recent scourgify on it.

"What happened?" Harry asked. He pulled himself up to a sitting position, leaning against the back of the chesterfield. His head had a residual ache to it, one he'd felt only once before, when Voldemort had possessed him at the Ministry of Magic.

Snape was leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his fingers steeped in front of his chin. He looked like Dr Watson, studying some sort of curiosity.

"The horcrux is real," Snape finally proclaimed.

Harry stared at him.

"You thought I'd just made it up? They don't exactly teach us about horcruxes at Hogwarts."

"Indeed not," Snape said, still studying Harry and ignoring the sarcasm. "How did you destroy them?"

"You're not going to like that part," Harry said, rubbing his forehead. It was worrying how much the diadem's power had affected him, as he couldn't remember any other horcrux doing so with just a single touch.

"I assure you, Potter, I have yet to enjoy any moment of this little field trip."

"Not even the peaceful castle?" Harry immediately asked, curious. Snape glanced away for a few seconds, which told Harry all he needed to know. Snape was unsettled by the peace as well.

"We used the Sword of Gryffindor, after it had been infused with Basilisk venom. Or just the fangs themselves."

Harry pulled the blanket up further; glad his socks were still on. The room was warm, but he much preferred to be under the blanket. The big clock over the mantel ticked loudly, and by turning his head to squint, Harry saw that it was getting on half nine.

"Oh that's all," Snape said, tone still dry despite his fatigue. "Use the venom of a creature that's supposedly been extinct for centuries."

He stood up and stalked toward the kitchenette, leaving Harry to stare dumbly at the smoothly painted wall nearest the cot. His head was achy and he was exhausted. Snape returned with a glass of dark purple coloured juice for Harry, and sat back down on the stool.

"I'm glad to hear it was nothing too taxing," Snape finished. Harry had begun to suspect that Snape's sarcasm was a mixture of his weird humour and a defensive action.

"Well, you could also kill it with fire," Harry yawned. "But that didn't work so well for Crabbe."

The juice was some sort of berry mix with a hint of mint or some sort of fresh herb, and it was oddly delicious. Harry drank most of it, running his free hand along the camp bed. It was surprisingly comfortable, and Harry guessed that Snape intended for him to use it overnight. Harry was rather fine with that. He was really looking forward to a night of sleep that he needn't worry about Snatchers, Death Eaters, and Voldemort.

"Do you want to destroy it tonight?" Harry asked, opening his eyes wider than normal to keep them from slipping shut.

"No. I wish to study it further," Snape said, with authority. He looked satisfied with Harry's mostly empty glass and summoned an extra blanket over to the cot. "And you will not be awake much longer."

"It's not that late," Harry argued in a mumble, blinking heavily as the blanket was dropped over him. "Wait, what'd you put in the juice?"

"A draught," Snape said, from a doorway to Harry's far left. He sounded smug. "You died earlier today Potter. I believe you need some rest."

....

Snape stood in the kitchenette, awaiting the kettle to boil and watching out over the half-wall into the living room. Potter looked so tiny, curled up on the cot in a defensive position as he slept. The draught had certainly knocked him out, and while Snape was quite confident Potter would have fallen asleep without it, the boy appeared so exhausted that Snape figured he would have had a restless night's sleep. As it was, Potter was already slightly drooling on to his pillow.

His tea steeping, Snape used a scrap bit of parchment on the kitchen counter to write out the seven horcruxes that Potter had told him about. Every ounce of investigation he'd done since returning had shown that they had managed to return to 1991 without the paradox of having two versions of themselves in the same time.

The horcruxes were concerning. It grated on every inch of Snape's nerves that he did not know how they'd arrived in the past, (though he'd never admit that he knew Potter had nothing to do with their current predicament) and it bothered him even further that the

horcruxes still existed and seemed to recognize Potter. The diadem that they'd retrieved only an hour earlier was currently locked in a lead box in his personal lab, under a warded and bloody heavy weight set. It made Snape somewhat twitchy to have something that felt so intensely evil inside his own living quarters.

Potter moved on the bed again, and Snape debated summoning another blanket over. The room was toasty from the fire, but his flat tended to get chilly past two in the morning. Working quickly, Snape walked over to the cot and took the blankets off. Potter shivered visibly, but quick wand-work replaced the battered clothes with a set of flannel pyjamas. Snape noticed the cuts and bruises on Potter's neck, hairline, and hands, pausing to look at them. The boy even had small burn welts on his palms and wrists. Covering him back up with the two blankets, Snape made a mental note to give Potter burn cream in the morning. He dropped a third blanket on the floor next to the cot, and made his way to the bedroom door.

The fire was reduced to embers and Snape picked up one of his notebooks from the desk, intent on composing some notes on what he'd learned from Potter in the evening. Potter was hidden behind the couch, and unseen from Snape's bedroom door, but this was a very rare occasion in which Snape did not actually mind having someone else stay in his flat. Snape figured it was because of the war they'd been through, and the fact that the boy knew far more about him than any other living person, save for the headmaster himself. He didn't have the energy to continue with the antagonism, and since they'd been thrown back together, Snape had concluded that if anything were to get accomplished, it would not be by having he and Potter at each other's throats.

Besides, if they could find a way to destroy the horcruxes before the Dark Lord returned to corporal form, perhaps this time around Harry Potter would not have been raised solely for slaughter. Snape allowed himself a tiny smile as he leaned against the bedroom door and surveyed his room. His beloved, most comfortable, bedroom that none but a house elf and himself had seen in nearly ten years. Perhaps this time, they could defeat Voldemort and the last bit of Lily Evans that Snape could ever see would survive.

....

Harry woke to hear banging in the kitchenette. He was rather disorientated, waking up behind a soft leather wall and under the weight of three blankets. He also appeared to be in flannel pyjamas, which he couldn't remember wearing in more than three years.

"Potter, wake up," Snape called, crashing something down onto a counter top.

Harry winced at the noise, but yawned and sat up in the bed. His spectacles were on the stool Snape had been sitting on the night before, and there was a small jar of what looked like burn cream next to them.

"What time is it?" Harry hoarsely asked, stretching his arms up. He half expected to see his golden snitch rising up from his shirt pocket to greet him, but then he remembered that the snitch wouldn't be given back to him for another six years.

"Six am," came the answer. Snape came back into the room, dressed in his usual clothes minus the robes. He had a plate of muffins and tea, which he put down on the table. "You will need to return to the tower shortly."

"Yeah, alright," Harry said, forcing himself up out of the cot. "I guess they'll all be waiting for me."

He stumbled over to the couch, trailing the blanket behind him and accidentally catching his foot on a book by the side of the couch. Snape flinched very slightly, almost as if it was an instant reaction to catch Harry if he'd fallen forward.

"Why are you staring at me?" Harry asked, dropping onto the couch.

Snape quirked his head slightly to the side before answering, dragging his hair back and hooking it over his ear.

"I am slightly surprised to find you this agreeable so early in the morning," Snape said, startling Harry with his honesty. There was very little sarcasm in the answer; it seemed to just be an observation. "Your father much preferred his late night explorations and adventures, and your mother was downright combative before ten."

"Really?" Harry asked, a small smile on his face. He remembered now that Snape had been his mother's first friend in the magical world, and made a mental note to ask Snape later - once they'd settled more into the past - about his mum.

"Eat while it's warm," Snape somewhat ordered, making it clear that he didn't want to talk about Lily Potter by nodding at the plate of muffins. He had a large notebook on the rattan ottoman, and it looked like he'd been scribbling in it all night.

"Did you sleep at all?" Harry asked, reaching out for a mug of tea and pausing for a second as he saw that Snape had prepared the tea like Harry had had the night before.

Snape inclined his head, drinking his own tea.

"Somewhat," Snape answered. He picked up his notebook and summoned a pen from somewhere behind Harry. "How long do they take to kill?"

"The horcruxes? Five minutes or so," Harry answered, twisting the top of the blueberry muffin off.

Snape nodded at this, and recorded the information.

"When did the headmaster first tell you about the horcruxes?"

Harry munched on the blueberry muffin and thought.

"Not until the end of second year. He said he realised it after I brought him the diary."

"This is the same diary which possessed Ginevra Weasley?" Snape confirmed, not looking up as he wrote.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. Some of the muffin crumbled down his shirt and he moved fast to catch the bits. "It's at Malfoy Manor, I think."

This caught Snape's attention.

"Is it really?"

"I think so. During the summer Lucius Malfoy slipped it into her cauldron at the bookstore in Diagon Alley."

"I shall have to think of a reason to visit the manor," Snape said, writing more notes down.

"I'd rather not go back there again," Harry said, shuddering. "You know, there were rumours when I was in first year that you were Draco Malfoy's godfather or something. All chummy with the Malfoys."

Snape gave him an absolutely disgusted look, and Harry choked on his muffin in laughter. Coughing heavily and gasping, he missed Snape's *anapneo*, but felt the cool rush of air hit his throat.

"The Malfoy family are very high up amongst the ranks of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord. With my position as a spy, it is imperative that I remain on good terms with such a family."

"If you are prepared," Harry mumbled, rubbing his forearms under the sleeves of his pyjamas. The fireplace had a small fire in it, but the morning chill hadn't worn off the room yet.

"Pardon?" Snape asked, looking at him in slight confusion.

"If you are prepared," Harry repeated, louder. "It's what Dumbledore asked you, the night Voldemort came back."

Snape's face had a strange look on it as he studied Harry, before finally returning to his notebook.

"We will have to return to our mutual loathing, whilst out in the castle during the day," Snape said, as if it was merely a passing thought he had.

"I don't think I saw much of you in first year, just during classes and sometimes in the hall," Harry thought, trying to remember. "Except for when we thought you were after the Stone."

"The Stone, yes," Snape said. He sounded tired, and dropped his notebook on the rattan footstool.

"It's safe. Quirrell won't be able to get to it until sometime in June," said Harry. He remembered quite clearly that it was around exam time that Quirrell had gotten the final piece of information he needed.

"You know who gave Quirrell the information," Snape accused, though he did not look surprised.

Harry looked away, using magic to clean all the muffin crumbs he'd dropped.

"I'll pretend to hate you in the hallways and class, so it doesn't ruin your position as a spy," Harry responded instead, refusing to give up Hagrid. "But this time around, do you have to be so hard on Neville? I don't see why you hate him so much."

Snape looked a mixture of angry and disappointed at something. It wasn't a very good look, as his forehead was wrinkled and he had splotchy red patches on his cheeks.

"Even you should be able to figure that out, Potter," Snape evenly clipped.

"Why, because he's clumsy?" Harry blankly asked.

"I'm sure the headmaster told you that there were two possible boys that would fulfil the prophecy," Snape said, exasperated. He stood up and left the room, heading back to what Harry assumed was his own bedroom.

A second door was between the kitchenette and the one Snape had disappeared to, and Harry hoped it was the washroom. He'd had too much tea to go back to Gryffindor tower without a stop, and thought the entire time he was in the loo. The answer came to him as he looked into the mirror, washing his hands. If Neville had been the boy who lived, Harry's mum might have still been alive.

Humbled, and still tired, Harry quietly changed back into his day clothes. He folded the pyjamas neatly and left them on the cot, along with the folded blankets. When he turned to head toward the door, he was surprised to see Snape standing in the doorway to a darkened bedroom. He was holding a journal in his hand, and after a moment's thought, handed it to Harry.

"As we have absolutely no reason to interact on a daily basis, alternate forms of communication will be essential."

The journal was a school-regulation single subject one, with a dark black/green sheen to the cover. The inside pages were blank, and Harry could feel the magic of some protective wards on it.

"Thanks, sir," Harry said, clutching the book tightly as he slipped out to the long hallway toward Snape's office.

....

Carrying the notebook Snape gave him under his arm, Harry made his way quickly through the dungeons and back up the smaller seldom-used stairs to get back up to Gryffindor tower. He automatically skipped over one step on the stairs that was a vanishing step, and just before passing a set of armour, stopped suddenly. Irritated at his trick failing, Peeves shot out from the armour - one of his favourite haunts - and cursed a streak at Harry as he zoomed off.

"Well spotted, Harry," an amused voice said, from the shadows off the hallway.

Startled out of thought, Harry nearly dropped the book as he looked up and spotted a much younger looking Albus Dumbledore standing by a tapestry. His royal purple robes clashed rather magnificently with the tapestry, but Dumbledore didn't seem to be bothered much by it.

"Headmaster," Harry said, clutching his fingers tighter around the journal. His eyes darted to Dumbledore's right hand, noting it was its normal lively colour. As were the twinkling blue eyes, looking at him fondly.

"You haven't been looking for the mirror again, have you Harry?" Dumbledore asked, leading Harry down the hall toward the grand staircases. He sounded concerned and grandfatherly, and Harry's heart ached as he was reminded just how much he'd missed Dumbledore.

"The mir...no sir, I haven't," Harry shook his head.

"Ah, I was wondering, as it is rather early in the morning for you to be out wandering the dungeons. In rather dirty clothing, no less."

"Oh, oh yeah, I was in detention with Snape," Harry said, looking down at his ripped clothes. He should probably get rid of them, but they were almost the only things he had from his past life. Or future life. Whatever it was.

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore lightly corrected. "I don't believe I shall ask why."

He sounded amused, and Harry remembered that Snape had talked to Dumbledore the day before. Without wanting to say anything to contradict what Snape had said, Harry just grinned.

"Probably for the best, sir."

Dumbledore smiled knowingly and nodded his head.

"Off to bed with you then, or perhaps a nice shower first," Dumbledore advised, pausing a hallway corridor at the grand staircases.

"Yes sir," Harry replied, bouncing up the stairs.

"Oh Harry," Dumbledore called, waking up a few of the portraits. Harry paused on the steps, thankfully unmoving ones. "Remember that you do not need a mirror to see those who are your family. You merely need to look around you."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed as he thought about the statement, and how true it became for him when he'd gone through the war.

"Yes sir," Harry said, slower and deep in thought as he returned to his dormitory.

...

The common room was very quiet still. Three low candles burned in the corner of the room, and Harry's step faltered for a second as he noticed that what at first had appeared to be a bundle of blankets in the corner on a chair was actually a boy. He looked a bit older than Ron

and Hermione, and Harry figured the boy was in second year. He had a book in his hand, some sort of hot drink next to him, and had clearly been sitting there a while. He gave Harry a look that was almost resentful, as if Harry had spoiled the boy's perfect morning and the empty common room's peace.

Nodding to the boy but not saying anything, Harry passed through the room quickly and headed up the stairs. None of his dorm mates were awake, although Seamus was talking loudly enough in his sleep that Harry had at first thought he was up. Opening his journal, Harry took a quill out of his bedside table drawer and stared at the first blank page. Snape said he'd tested them out, and that it would work flawlessly, but Harry still wanted to make sure. He didn't want to write anything stupid like 'testing' though. Finally deciding on something, Harry put quill to paper.

"Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

The ink stayed on the page for a few seconds, long enough for anyone to read if they needed to. The book, which was sitting on Harry's lap, turned warm as the ink disappeared.

"The legend or the events of your second year involving Miss Weasley?"

Harry smiled and thought of what to say in return. It'd been silly of him to write in the journal as he'd done with Tom Riddle's diary but he did remember being told years before though that not all magic was inherently bad. Some spells could be used for very useful things, like two-way communication. It was just Voldemort's usage of the magic that had tainted Harry's idea of it.

"They're both related," Harry wrote back. "We'll need something from the Chamber to destroy the horcruxes."

He tossed the warm journal on the bed, letting Snape have time to compose a reply as Harry changed his clothes for another set of pyjamas. It was a Sunday morning, and from what he remembered of his dorm mates, no one would be surfacing for another two hours, just in time for 9.30 breakfast.

"Next weekend," came Snape's reply. **"Stay to your school schedule this week."**

Harry huffed quietly at that and closed the book, not bothering to send a reply. Snape had mentioned before having to wait till the following weekend to do anything, which Harry had objected to. He wanted to complete whatever they had to do in this time period fast, so that he could return home. Snape, however, insisted on leaving things until weekends or detentions so that no suspicions would arise from Harry spending unscheduled time with Snape.

"Yes father," Harry sarcastically muttered, putting the journal under his pillow. It was cold now, as Snape must have put it aside and stopped writing in it too. Harry settled back into bed, tossing his glasses at the nightstand. Ron grumbled at the noise, but didn't open his eyes.

"Good bed," Harry said, patting his mattress. He couldn't count how many times he'd thought of how much his four-poster bed at Hogwarts as home - both while spending the year

camping, and while spending the summers at the Dursleys.

Harry was just slipping into his dreams when he scrunched up his face. Why would he even *joke* about calling Snape his father?

....

The week passed by extremely slowly. Harry made a few mistakes, referencing things that hadn't happened yet, and he was rather more jumpy than his friends were used to. Whether it was from Peeves dropping something in the hallway, or people shrieking as they ran to class, Harry still found that he was habitually on guard.

And then there was Malfoy. Harry felt bad for Malfoy, seeing through the false bravado and looking at the little boy who would grow up to do any sort of dark deed to advance with his family. It still didn't stop him from being a little twerp, and Harry had to seriously hold back from just hexing the wanker.

Classes were a different challenge altogether. On Monday Harry had automatically gotten dressed and done up his tie, as he'd done for the past seven years. He'd not noticed until too late that Ron was frustrated with his own tie, and that Neville and Seamus were simply keeping the knots in and loosening them to fit over their heads.

After explaining to Ron that he'd gotten bored in detention and practised tying and untying, Harry had reminded himself to hide his knowledge. It was difficult remembering how little he'd known as an eleven year old, but Harry had caught on that any time Ron or Hermione questioned him, he only needed to bring up Nicholas Flamel to sufficiently distract them.

"We still don't know who he is, Ron," Harry lied, "But he's somehow connected to the Stone. Last night though, I wondered if maybe Quirrell isn't as innocent as he seems."

"What are you talking about, Harry? Professor Quirrell can't even talk about ghosts without being afraid," Hermione whispered. Flitwick had just entered the classroom, and was charming a brush to erase the chalkboard.

"Remember when you set Snape's robes on fire at the quidditch match?" Harry whispered, opening up his notebook. The journal he used to communicate with Snape was under his pile, and he carried it with him to each class. Both of them were busy during the day, but Harry wrote down ideas and memories from his last scavenger hunt for the horcruxes, and Snape responded in kind when he could.

"Of course," Ron said, smiling. "It was brilliant."

Hermione blushed, as she nodded slightly. Flitwick was starting to talk, and Harry knew that Hermione would tell them to shut up shortly. They were discussing fun charms today, and Flitwick was starting with the tickling charm.

"Snape wasn't the only one casting something at the time. I saw Quirrell chanting too."

"Blimey, we weren't even looking at Quirrell," Ron whispered, his expression narrowed in thought.

"*Rictusempra* is the incantation, class," Flitwick said, demonstrating the wand movement along with it. Harry opened his journal, the one he used to communicate with Snape, and pretended to be writing notes. Beside him, Hermione was furiously copying down everything Flitwick was saying.

"*Chamber of Secrets tomorrow?*" Harry wrote, tapping his quill against the journal. He closed it quickly as Flitwick began walking around the room, looking for volunteers. The journal grew hot just as Flitwick approached, but Harry kept it shut and steadily looked at the blackboard, as if he was trying to memorize every single word written there.

"Mr Finnegan! Come up to the front and test out the spell," Flitwick said. Harry let out a small breath with relief, and snuck a peek at the journal as Seamus collapsed to the floor in laughter.

"Yes. You'll receive a detention in class today, have no fear."

"*Brilliant*," Harry wrote back, somewhat glad that sarcasm wasn't easily transmitted through writing.

...

Harry's detention was scheduled for two in the afternoon, and he left Ron and Hermione at the library to attend it. They were spending the afternoon researching Nicholas Flamel.

"Are there any spells for getting rid of ghosts?" Harry softly asked, pushing open the door of the washroom. Snape looked rather irritated that Harry was leading him into a girls' lavatory, but followed along none the less.

"*Exadigo*," Snape replied, looking about the disused bathroom. The house elves still seemed to clean the washroom on a regular basis, but Myrtle made a rather mucky mess of the room. Ready for her, Harry coughed loudly in the empty washroom.

"A boy! What are yo..."

"*Exadigo!*" Harry cast. He got a small glance of her as she floated out of the loo stall, before being banished elsewhere.

"She's very nosy," Harry explained, walking by the sinks and looking for the little serpent carving.

"Most ghosts are," Snape commented, his arms crossed. "I don't believe they have anything else to do."

Harry stopped, his thumb rubbing up and down over the snake carving on the tap.

"I guess not, yeah."

He leaned forward and whispered in parseltongue to the tap, hoping that he'd not lost the skill. The achy grinding and groaning of the sink moving proved that he hadn't, and Harry noticed that Snape's normally expressive face was rather slack as he watched the floor open up.

"Potter..."

"Could be worse," Harry said, ignoring the rank smell that emanated from the hole. "Last time I went down there I was twelve, with Ron, and Lockhart."

"Three twelve year olds, then," Snape snidely commented, moving forward to glance over the hole.

Harry smiled and looked up suddenly.

"How are you...will you be, after the, uh, snake thing?"

"The snake thing?" Snape asked, raising his eyebrow. "Try to be more eloquent, Potter. I know it's hard, but try."

"Piss off," Harry grumbled.

"Excuse me?" Snape icily responded. His strong white fingers had shot out and clamped around Harry's arm.

"I'm not talking to you as a student," Harry impatiently explained. With his free hand he checked to make sure the three small vials he'd packed for the trip were still safely in his pocket. "I'm talking to you as an Order member who's been through war with you, Snape."

Snape studied him, his eyes still showing anger as he thought about what Harry had said. Harry wasn't lying - between the memories he'd seen of Snape's, the occlumency flashes Snape had seen of his past, and everything that had happened through the war, Harry strongly felt that Snape would never just be his professor anymore.

"Professor Snape," Snape finally said. "I still deserve the respect of the position."

Harry grinned, toeing the edge of the slide.

"See you at the bottom then, Professor."

He jumped into the hole, grimacing as he hit the curved slide of the pipe. It was cold and wet and not nearly as fun as it had been to his twelve year old self all those years ago. Not now that Harry knew what was waiting for him on the other side.

Oddly, there were far less rat skeletons on the ground in the little containment area where he shot out. The few that were there crumbled to dust as he walked around. Harry cast a *lumos* spell, and noted that while still dirty and gross, the pipe was also covered in large and ugly cobwebs.

Snape cast his own *lumos* as he stood beside Harry, wiping the dust off his trousers. He'd not heard Snape come down the tube, but Harry figured Snape had floated down or done something to avoid sliding in the gross water, as the man didn't appear wet at all.

"*Tersus*," Snape said, rolling his eyes as the charm dried Harry's pants.

Harry led them down under the castled, twisting and turning through the stalagmites and stalactites that had formed from the mineral water that passed through the underground cavern.

"Do you know how horcruxes are actually made?" Harry asked, pausing as he checked to make sure they were on the right path. There was no giant snakeskin shedding, and it took a moment for Harry to realise that without the diary to set the Basilisk out on the prowl at the school, there would be no shedding.

"Yes," Snape tersely responded. "They are not anything for a small..."

"I'm eighteen," Harry interrupted, looking over his shoulder at Snape. "And I am one. I think I'm old enough to know."

Snape didn't answer, looking first for fault in Harry's logic.

"Miss Granger was not able to find the answer?"

Harry kicked a small pile of rubble loose from the path, clearing it out of the way so neither of them would trip on it. He didn't anticipate having to make a mad dash out of the Chamber, but he did it just in case.

"Not quite. None of the books in the library mention it of course, and the books she got from Dumbledore only talked about a most foul spell."

Harry could see the snake door in the distance, and started walking directly for it.

"Most foul spell, indeed," Snape repeated. "You are aware that at the time of horcrux creation, one has a wand, a fractured soul, a container, and a dead body."

"Yes," Harry said, stopping in front of the door. He looked at Snape, who was expressionless save for the dark glittering eyes that were staring at the complicated locking system on the door.

"You first remove the fractured part of the soul from your body. You cannot create a horcrux by simply taking it out of yourself at the same time. The fractured soul goes easily into the dead body, as it merely views it as a very temporary stop before ascending to the afterlife."

Harry's face felt colder, and his lips twisted up in revulsion. The murder victim was used as a temporary hold for the soul?

"A spell is cast on the container," Snape continued, in the same calm voice he used when he was lecturing a regular potions class in the dungeons. "To ready it for the soul. And finally, the spell to banish the soul to the container is cast."

"And it just goes in?" Harry softly asked, wondering just how the hell his scar horcrux was actually made. This time Snape made eye contact, and he had a strange look on his face.

"Not willingly. Eternal damnation, Potter. That soul, like the castor, will never go to any afterlife. It will be damned to spend the rest of eternity in whichever trinket of a container the spell castor has chosen."

"Does it fight back?" Harry asked, swallowing loudly as he pictured in his mind the horcruxes that Voldemort had made.

"Rather violently," Snape answered. He didn't say anything else, and Harry was left to wonder if Snape had seen or read about actual examples. Turning to face the door, he hissed at it and decided that he didn't want to know.

"Remember, don't look at this thing's eyes," Harry said, more to himself than Snape. The door opened, and Harry walked inside the Chamber of Secrets.

It was much the same as it had been in second year, puddles of water on the floor, low and nearly useless torches illuminating the walls as they walked past and leaving shadows all throughout the Chamber. The large carving of Salazar Slytherin at the end of the corridor looked no less imposing as it had at twelve, but Harry was comforted by the fact that he had Snape with him this time.

"So, I'll call it up, and we'll stun it," Harry said, to confirm. "With *Stupefy*?"

"That *is* what it's used for," Snape sarcastically responded. He was looking everywhere in the room - at the carvings on the wall, at the water crevices in the floor, and at the vile expression on the Founder's sculpted face. "This room is stunning."

"Yeah, great acoustics," Harry distractedly agreed. He'd brought a few things to help him, but had a sneaking suspicion that neither Fawkes nor the Sorting Hat would come to his rescue this time. Nonetheless, they both took their planned places, climbing up the statue head and hiding behind the mouth opening.

"Ready?"

"Potter," Snape warned, tired of the stalling.

"Snape, it's really big. Just, be ready."

"Everything is really big to a scrawny twelve year old. Call it forth," Snape snidely said, wand at the ready.

Harry thought Snape sounded suspiciously confident for a man who'd nearly been killed by a snake, but he didn't say anything else, save for the low hissing noise that brought forth the Basilisk.

A horrible scraping noise sounded, of scales grinding over whatever pipe led up to the mouth of the statue.

I command you, Harry hissed, torn between closing his eyes and watching for the Basilisk to emerge. He slitted his eyes, watching through the lashes, and his breath went shallow as the first scaly peaks of the Basilisk appeared. It was facing the entrance of the Chamber, and its ugly horns on the back of its head looked razor sharp. Snape stiffened beside Harry, but Harry's attention was almost completely focused on the Basilisk. It was a lot bigger than he'd remembered.

Harry held up his hand, and started counting with his fingers. They'd agreed on this earlier, as Harry had explained about the Basilisk's exceptional hearing. Snape's wand, still raised from before Harry called the Basilisk, seemed to be aimed in the right direction.

At one, Harry took a deep breath and cast as strongly as he could.

"STUPEFY!"

His voice echoed strongly off the walls of the Chamber, the acoustics just as good as he'd imagined. The Basilisk stopped moving immediately, and Harry got a sick feeling in his stomach as he realised that his voice had been the only one to sound out. Snape had not cast his spell.

Trusting that his own hex had slowed the Basilisk's movements for a few seconds, Harry stole a glance to his side. Snape was standing rigid beside him, arm still raised and eyes locked on the gigantic snake below them. His mouth was opened slightly, as if he was breathing very lightly, and his sallow skin was even whiter than before.

"Snape!" Harry urged, kicking the man's foot. "I need your help!"

"Petrificus totalus!" Snape said, speaking quietly on the first syllable but ending loud and firmly. A bright red jet shot from his wand and hit the back of the Basilisk's neck, and Harry exhaled loudly in relief.

"I told you it was big," Harry said, slightly exasperated. He walked to the edge of the sculpted head they were standing on and looked down. The Basilisk hadn't even fully emerged from its hiding spot.

"Pardon me, Mr Potter. Basilisks haven't been seen for four hundred years and precise information is somewhat scarce," Snape replied, sounding put together again. He also looked over the side, and seemed to be very disturbed at the sheer size of the snake.

"Yeah, and it's only rumoured that there are acromantulas in Scotland. I can show you where those are if you want," Harry sarcastically replied.

"Potter, I will not hesitate to take points for disrespect," Snape coolly reminded him. He reached out and touched the back scales on the Basilisk's neck, his lips curling upward in distaste.

"Fine, let's just get the venom and leave. I don't want this thing coming back to life," Harry said, walking to the side of the sculpture to see if the Basilisk's mouth was open. He'd argue

with Snape about sarcasm later, when they were not in the same room with a fifty-foot monster.

"Don't look at the eyes," Snape murmured, reminding Harry of the danger. He had his wand out and waving over the Basilisk, as if casting a spell to check vitals.

"How do we get the venom out?" Harry asked, being very careful to not look any further than the jaw of the giant snake.

"With this," Snape replied, taking a large glass container out of his robe pocket. It looked like the type that muggles used for blood tests. Harry watched with disgusted curiosity as Snape jabbed the glass container against a rounded skin sac under the Basilisk's jawbone. It filled up quickly with a dark viscous fluid, and Harry imagined he could hear the Basilisk trying to growl against the two stunning spells it was under.

Snape suddenly wrenched the vial away from the Basilisk, turning to cap the vial. Harry watched with a stunned expression as the venom continued to spurt out of the hole in the venom sac, landing on Snape's arm.

"Move!" Harry managed to blurt, running over to pull Snape out of the way.

Snape's robes were already starting to disintegrate under the corrosive poison, but the man didn't make a sound as the venom reached his skin. Snape was grimacing in pain, but still keeping steady so that the rest of the poison wouldn't spill. He set the vial down on the stone carving they were standing on, while Harry used a spell to cut away the left sleeve of Snape's clothing. In his pocket Harry had shoved Essence of Dittany, Mandrake Draught, and a very tiny vial of phoenix tears. He'd stolen it from Snape's personal stores, and had hoped to not need it.

Snape's arm was pockmarked with burn marks, and if Harry hadn't known better, he would have thought acid had been spilled directly on the skin. The dark hair on Snape's arm was somewhat matted around the burns, and the flesh was an angry red colour with open sores. Harry cradled the arm in his own hand as he tried not to waste any of the tears. They dropped silently into the venom burns, and out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Snape wince. Harry didn't remember the tears burning when the Basilisk had bitten him, but in Harry's case the venom had been injected into his body, not burned on.

Harry let go of Snape's arm once the burns healed, sitting back against the stone carving. To his left, the Basilisk huffed a small amount of air, signalling the waning of the spells that held it in place.

"We need to go," Harry said, standing up. He placed the vials back in his pocket, and glanced nervously at the giant snake. Harry couldn't think of anything he wanted more right now, other than to return to his own time, than to get out of the Chamber.

Snape glared at him, before gathering the vial of venom and pulling himself to his feet. He cradled his arm to his chest, and grasped the torn material in his hand.

"You owe me a new set of robes."

Chapter 3

Not having Fawkes to fly them out of the Chamber, the walk back up was slow and aided by a sticky charm to their feet. Neither said a word, and Harry was grateful that the chatty Myrtle had not returned to the girls' washroom.

The way back to Snape's quarters in the dungeons was mostly quiet, save for a few lone Slytherins who were playing what appeared to be hide and go seek in the dungeons. Snape had absolutely no reprimand for them, which Harry thought slightly unfair, until he remembered that no other houses really wanted to play with the Slytherins. Snape had always favoured his own house, but Harry had a little more insight now as to why.

"Sir?" Harry asked, slightly confused as to why they'd stopped in front of the lower dungeons potions cupboard. It was for extra and rare ingredients, the kind that were not to be stored with the every day supplies students got into.

Snape crossed his arms, an action slightly diminished by the unattached sleeve on his right arm. The poison had been banished from the ruined material, but Snape still used it to cover his bare arm.

"The vials, Potter," Snape impatiently said. Harry's cheeks went a bit red, but he retrieved the unbroken vials from his pocket. He'd figured that Snape would know if someone had stolen from cupboard, but didn't regret doing it. Not after the venom had burned into Snape's arm.

"What's the cost?" Harry asked, raising his head stubbornly. He was an adult, and willing to pay for supplies he needed.

Snape stared at him in speculation, before shaking his head slightly and walking off toward his office.

"Professor," Harry started, following him.

"It's the school's cost," Snape explained, unlocking the door to his office. "The headmaster has always made sure that the best ingredients have been available to me for...whichever purpose."

"Oh," said Harry, surprised. "We should still split some costs. We'll have to do some travelling later for the other horcruxes."

Snape opened the small door that lead to his personal quarters, and Harry followed him back to the private lab.

"What costs are you anticipating?" Snape asked, almost conversationally. Harry suspected that Snape was just humouring him, but Harry was determined to interact like the adult he was.

"Food, supplies, incidentals," Harry said, shrugging. "Replacement robes."

Snape glanced at him before saying a spell to light all the lanterns and sconces in the room.

"I'm so very glad to see you've retained your sense of humour, Mr Potter," Snape said, putting on a pair of thick gloves. "Most important for a man facing your magnitude of life challenges."

Harry raised his eyebrows at that - it sounded as if Snape was almost teasing him, in a non-malicious way.

"The Basilisk returned unharmed to whatever den it has?" Snape inquired, holding the glass vial of venom up to the scone light. He'd tossed his torn sleeve to the workbench, and Harry found it extremely odd to watch him standing there with his arm exposed. He was so used to seeing Snape wrapped up in his robes that it was slightly unsettling.

"I think so. I spoke through the crack in the door, and I heard her slithering away."

Harry was sitting on a stool, slumped over and looking drained. Somehow knowing what was coming made Harry dread the adventures.

"Her?" Snape sharply asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "She didn't seem to appreciate our company."

"The feeling was mutual," Snape grimly said. He was using a set of very fine scales to weigh the venom, and Harry wondered if they had enough for all the horcruxes. He hoped so, as he couldn't imagine Snape voluntarily returning to the Chamber.

"Sorry for kicking you," Harry blurted, remembering that he'd done so. "I've never seen you freeze lik-"

"I did not freeze," Snape snapped, nearly dropping an extra weight on the scale. "I was caught off guard."

"I told you it was large," Harry said, as non-combative as he could make his tone.

"Potter," Snape warned, looking menacingly at Harry. "I am merely recovering from a traumatic attack a week ago. I highly advise that you drop the subject."

"Alright," Harry said, holding up his hands. Nagini had attacked him as well, but it wasn't to the same extent and Harry wasn't suicidal enough to mention it.

"If we need any more venom, I can just get it myself," Harry suggested, yawning.

Snape gave him an irritated look.

"You most certainly will not. You will never return to that Chamber unsupervised," Snape said, pointing a long skinny finger at him.

.....

Transfiguration classes were at a tricky part of the curriculum. They were at the point of transforming plants and flowers into non-living objects, such as a small photo frame or a set of cooking utensils. Harry found the work remarkably easy, and was extremely glad that though he'd returned to his eleven year old body, he could still do the magic he'd learned in his seven years in the wizarding world. Hermione was somewhat suspicious of his skills, and had outright asked if he was cheating.

"You can't cheat at transfiguration, Hermione," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "If it were divination or potions though, I'd agree with you."

The journal under his fingers grew warm, and Harry ignored the urge to immediately glance at it.

"Ahem," Ron coughed, an intense look of concentration on his face as he stared at the pot of daisies in front of him.

"We've never taken divination before, Harry," Hermione quietly said, shaking her head. She'd been given a rose, and had turned it into a wooden ladle with a red head and a green handle.

"No," Harry agreed, berating himself mentally for the slip up. "But it's just making guesses about what's to come, isn't it?"

Harry had purposefully turned his plant into a photo frame that still had green leaves stuck to it at random spots. He rather liked it, but knew McGonagall wouldn't give him full points.

"Guessing would be cheating," Hermione declared, trying the spell again on her rose.

Harry flipped open his journal and read the most recent message from Snape. It had been charmed to ensure no one else could read it, but Harry still safeguarded the journal, just in case someone took the security charms as a personal challenge. Not that he didn't trust Snape's work.

"The cup is in Gringotts already?"

Harry closed the journal and stared at his frame, appearing to be studying what had gone wrong. He was trying to remember what Dumbledore had told him of the cup - it was a founder's item, Voldemort considered those with a vault to be well off - so it should already be there. Voldemort would have given Bellatrix the cup before she'd been jailed and him defeated.

"Yes, it's there. The vault's deep below by the dragon; how are you getting in?"

"Polyjuice."

Confused, Harry stared at the notes on the blackboard at the front of the room. The words were blurred, he couldn't read them, and he tried to figure out how Snape would explain Bellatrix Lestrange's presence when she was still jailed.

"That won't work, will it? She's in jail. And where did you get her hair from?"

Ron finally succeeded at the transformation, and actually earned points for Gryffindor.

"Whatcha think, Harry? Send it home to Mum?"

Harry looked at the slightly dented utensil can and the ladle inside. The ladle was chipped and cracked like the pot had been, but it did seem to be made of wood.

"Definitely," Harry smiled. The journal warmed again and Harry went back to answering it.

"I have acquired a few strands of hair from all of the Death Eaters, for various purposes. With the exception of the Dark Lord."

"Sounds like an unpleasant task," Harry wrote, not even wanting to imagine how Snape had accomplished that. Another thought occurred to him, and he tried to fight a grin as he went to write it. He could only imagine the look on Snape's face upon reading the message.

"Is THAT why Voldemort is bald? So no one can polyjuice into him?"

Harry closed his journal, trying to concentrate as he reworked his frame to remove the leaves. The journal grew hot under his hand, but Professor McGonagall was walking around and he could only sneak a look at it a few moments later.

"I suspect your previous death and time travel experience has rendered you somewhat demented, Potter."

Harry snorted to himself, covering it up with a cough when Hermione gave him a strange look.

"I don't think I can get all the leaves off in time," Harry lied, looking toward the large hourglass at the front of the classroom. There was very little sand left, and it was thankfully the last class of the day.

Ron was rather proud of his transformation, and talked the entire way back to the tower of how he would wrap it up and give it to his mum. He went into a detailed description of how great the Burrow was, which confused Harry at first because he'd been there many times. Not in this time however, and Harry got a sickening feeling in his stomach. All those nights he'd spent at the Burrow with Ron and Hermione, joking and laughing as they heard everyone else banging about in the house, Bill and Fleur's wedding, getting up early for the Quidditch world cup, none of that had happened yet. Harry had a head full of memories that only existed to him, that his friends might never know. If he and Snape managed to destroy the horcruxes, would Harry, Ron, and Hermione become as close friends as they'd ended up? It had been hardship and the fight against Voldemort that had made their friendship nearly unbreakable.

"You look a bit sick, mate," Ron said, breaking through his thoughts. They'd made it to the grand staircase, but Harry couldn't remember the walk getting there.

"I..." Harry shook his head. Ron, George, and Fred had broken him out of the Dursleys in the summer before second year, and he spent the rest of the summer at the Burrow. Would he get

to do that again? Not if they destroyed the diary, and Harry would never meet Dobby, the house elf so loyal he gave his life for Harry.

"I feel sick," Harry said, clutching his stomach. He wasn't lying - there were so many things that would change by them destroying the horcruxes, and Harry didn't want to give up the memories he'd already built. He didn't want to give up what they'd all earned by sacrifice.

"Maybe you should go to the infirmary, Harry," Hermione said, concerned and slightly mothering. Harry leaned back against the cool stone walls, his palms scraping slightly against the rough texture. Hermione, looking at him with her childish face that still threw Harry off guard. Maybe this time she wouldn't get tortured by Bellatrix. But then, maybe she and Ron wouldn't get together.

"Yeah," Harry quietly agreed. He just needed to figure out how to get there without breaking into frustrated tears.

"We'll go with you," Ron announced, looking around the hall as if he had to escort Harry through a crowd.

"No, no it's alright," Harry said, shaking his head. What he wanted right now was a quiet room with no other people to ask him what was wrong, as he didn't think he'd be able to not tell the truth about travelling back in time. And he knew how well that would go over.

"Go have dinner, I'll see you after," Harry said, standing as straight as he could and walking in the direction of the infirmary. Harry could feel them watching him as he walked as calmly as he could, and once he turned a corner, took off into a run.

....

The infirmary was mostly dark, as Madame Pomfrey seemed to be out getting supplies or something. Harry didn't much care, as he moved directly to the large fireplace at the front of the room, near her office. Having been a patient once or twice in the infirmary, Harry knew that there was Floo powder in an old Muggle first aid box on a shelf near the fireplace, so he grabbed a handful and threw it into the low fire. It flared up and Harry took a deep breath, jumping in.

Snape was sitting at his desk, and at first glance he appeared to be marking. His quill jumped across the page as Harry stumbled out of the fire, crashing into the extremely uncomfortable visitor's chair Snape had in front of his desk.

"You are lucky my fireplace was not warded shut," Snape coolly said, covering his surprise as he went back to his notes. There was a mug of something warm, with a spoon sticking out of it, on the desk next to Snape, and a plate of two empire biscuits and crumbs.

Harry leaned against the chair, taking a deep breath to quell his stomach. He had several smart remarks for Snape, but didn't have the energy for it. He didn't understand how he could be falling apart now, over a bunch of memories, after all he'd been through.

Snape must have been suspicious about the silence, as he finally looked up and made eye contact, taking in Harry's dishevelled hair and pale face.

"What happened?" Snape quietly asked.

"I've lost my friends," Harry said, hating how small he was again compared to Snape's large desk. "They know me, but they don't know what we've been through. It's like the people I knew all suddenly have amnesia, and their memories will never come back."

Snape put his quill down, studying Harry as Harry caught his breath.

"What if...what if we're only as strong as we are, because of everything we went through?" Harry asked, tapping the back of the chair and looking down at Snape's hands. "What if by destroying the horcruxes with you, I destroy the friendships I have with my friends?"

Snape didn't answer him immediately, and after a minute Harry wondered if he should just leave. He didn't want to see any other people though, so his only other option was to escape to the Room of Requirement. Snape suddenly sat back though, and Harry looked up at him.

"Is guaranteeing them a life without the Dark Lord not worth it?" Snape asked. He waited for Harry to fully ponder the question before taking a long drink from the dark mug on his desk, once again avoiding the spoon's handle. It rested against his cheek, very close to his eye, and Harry wondered if there was a heat mark on his cheek or an indent from the spoons.

"Why do you keep the spoon in when you drink?" Harry asked.

Snape slowly placed the mug down and answered frankly.

"A learned old wives' tale. It keeps the tea hot longer."

"Does it?" Harry relaxed his grip on the chair back, feeling a bit more settled than he'd first been when he arrived.

"Negligible. Answer the question," Snape pressed.

"Of course it is," Harry replied, feeling guilty that he'd been so upset over lost memories. He'd gone back in time, and all his friends were alive and well. Snape had gone back, and his best friend was still gone. "I never wanted anyone to die for me. I didn't want them to get hurt, to suffer, to lose anything. Not for me."

Snape scoffed and pushed the biscuit plate toward Harry.

"If you think this war is only about you, by all means fight it yourself."

"I know it's not," Harry said, taking a biscuit. "But Voldemort thought that if he destroyed me, he'd automatically win the war."

"He also thought Muggleborns were worthless," Snape dismissively said. "You have homework for tonight. In the journal I want you to write down everything you remember

about the diary. Just the diary, and when it was mentioned. Write about that house elf as well, the one that knew of it."

"You don't want to go to Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked, slightly puzzled. The biscuit was delicious, but he'd get a sugar rush if he only ate them for the night.

"Not if there's an easier way," Snape said, nodding at the door. "Go back to dinner, your absence will be suspicious."

"Yes sir," Harry automatically responded, distracted by his thoughts of Dobby. Dobby had tried his best to be extremely helpful to Harry, in his own dangerous way, but he couldn't disobey his master by telling Harry of the danger coming. This time, Harry knew what Dobby was warning of, so perhaps he could persuade Dobby to help them further. Dobby knew of the diary long before it had been given to Ginny, so maybe Harry could get Dobby to give it to Snape. If the little elf knew it would be destroyed...

Stopping at the doorframe, Harry thought of one more thing he wanted to ask.

"How hard is it to see him again?"

Snape hadn't returned to his notes, he had just been balancing the quill on his fingers and watching Harry. Harry knew he didn't need to clarify that it was Dumbledore he was referring to.

"Life is neither fair nor easy, Mr Potter," Snape evasively answered. His face showed nothing, but Harry remembered how angry Snape had been in the memories of Dumbledore demanding his own murder.

"Be nice if it wasn't this hard though," Harry replied. He wrapped his school robe tighter around himself, and walked back toward the Great Hall. How odd was it that Snape would be the one to provide a bit of comfort now? It wasn't truly surprising though, Harry knew, as Snape had never been a man to sugar coat anything for Harry's own protection. Evasive, secretive, loyal to the very inch of his life. But Snape had never lied to Harry just to make him feel better. He'd also rarely said anything at all to make Harry feel better, but that was a minor detail.

...

After spending a full hour after bedtime behind the curtains of his bed, scribbling into the shared journal about the life of Dobby the house elf and the Tom Riddle diary, Harry fell asleep to strange dreams of the memory - Tom Riddle playing snakes and ladders with Dobby in the Chamber of Secrets. Riddle turned into Bellatrix, and the game into a chanting dance of Ring Around the Rosie - before Harry sat up in bed, disorientated. The journal was under his stack of books on his bedside cabinet, and Snape hadn't written any reply to him in it. Nothing else in the room seemed out of order, and beside him, Ron was whispering something in his sleep.

Shaking his head, Harry burrowed back down into his bed covers and closed his eyes. Tomorrow he'd ask Snape if the dream meant anything, or if it was just from exhaustion.

The following day, Harry walked with Ron and Hermione down the second floor corridor toward the stairs. Directly above them was the third floor and Fluffy, who they hoped was still guarding the chamber. Harry knew the Stone was still safe, but Ron and Hermione didn't and Harry didn't have a good explanation for him knowing. He didn't want to tell his friends he was older than them, didn't want to tell them about the horrors waiting for them in the future. There was time enough for that to come.

"Harry, you're staring into space," Hermione said, giving him a peculiar look. She was a very smart witch, and Harry was slightly uncomfortable with the knowing looks she'd been giving him lately.

"Just thinking," Harry said, shifting his notebooks in his arms.

"Mr Potter," a deep voice behind them said, startling all three. Snape towered over them, and had a half sneer on his face as if he thought Harry, Ron, and Hermione were up to something.

"You are to accompany me to the Headmaster's office."

Harry stared at Snape, searching for any other sign in the man's bored look, but saw nothing. He did notice Ron's intensely curious eyes looking somewhat timidly between Snape and Harry, and he suddenly remembered that at eleven, Snape was terrifying and big and almost inhuman.

"Now, sir?" Harry asked, as if it were an inconvenience. Hermione's eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"No, this is merely a social invitation. Yes, *now* Potter," Snape impatiently said.

Ron appeared insulted at that, and it was almost comical the way it was written all over his face. No wonder the professors had never had trouble knowing what the first years were up to.

"See you guys later," Harry shrugged apologetically, slipping between his two best friends to follow Snape up to the Headmaster's office.

...

Professor McGonagall was waiting for them, and Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, spinning some sort of tale that had her smiling.

"Harry! Come in, come in. No need to be shy," Dumbledore said, waving him into the room. His office would never cease to be impressive to Harry, full of wonderful and magical objects that whirled and beeped and chirped for seemingly no reason.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry said, timidly taking his seat. He kept pinching his thigh through his pocket, to remember that he didn't know Dumbledore that well at this time in his life. It wouldn't do to sound overly familiar.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry added, smiling at her. Snape remained behind him, scowling at the room in general.

"Harry, there's been a small development with your relatives," Dumbledore said, sounding kind and grandfatherly. Harry's eyes focused sharply on him, before turning to look at McGonagall and Snape. There had never been an issue with the Dursleys in his original first year.

"What sort of development, sir? I haven't spoken to them since the first of September," Harry asked, clutching the notebooks in his lap.

"Just a minor matter that will be settled at Gringotts, in London," Dumbledore smiled. Professor McGonagall was sitting properly and sternly in her seat beside Harry, and she exuded a matronly aura.

"Yes, well, as minor as it is, you'll be going to London this afternoon to see to it," Professor McGonagall said.

"But it's Wednesday," Harry blurted, looking between Dumbledore and McGonagall. As much as he wanted to know just what the hell the Dursleys were up to, he did have evening classes to attend and it would look extremely suspicious if he didn't go.

"That it is, Potter," Snape said from behind him. "And lucky for you, I do not have any classes to teach this afternoon."

Harry tried to school his face into disappointment as he looked at Snape. Beside him, McGonagall was glaring sternly at her colleague.

"I'm certain Professor Snape will be efficient and diligent in taking care of the problem, Mr Potter. And I'll assume he would like to leave as soon as possible, so run along to your dormitory and fetch your vault key."

"Yes ma'am," Harry said, intent on doing just that. He'd been so careful to never mention the money to the Dursleys, and was starting to worry about what they'd be able to do with his vault.

Slightly distracted, Harry only just barely heard what Dumbledore said next, as the door was closing.

"Do what you must, Severus. Find this solicitor and explain that no one has any right to the Potter vaults but Harry Potter himself."

...

Ron was sprawled out on the couch as Harry passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady. He had his arms up and was waving his hands around like a conductor, with his robe sleeves flapping around him.

"Maybe Nicholas Flamel was a pilot," Ron said.

Hermione, who was sitting on the edge of the chesterfield and skimming over a chapter for the night's astronomy lesson, just rolled her eyes.

"Why would Dumbledore hide a plane in the castle?" Hermione asked.

"Doesn't have to be a plane," Ron stubbornly argued.

"I need to go to Diagon Alley," Harry interrupted, standing by Hermione.

"London?" Ron asked, sitting up. "But it's a school day. You can't go to London."

"I have to. I think the Dursleys have found out I have a vault full of gold," Harry said, determined to do what he could to fight them.

"What?" Ron blurted, aghast. "The goblins will never give it over."

"Harry, that's horrible!" Hermione insisted. "What's Dumbledore going to do?"

"He's sending me with Snape to Gringotts, so I can sign papers or something," Harry said, keeping his voice down. A class of upper year students were returning to the common room.

"Good idea. Snape'll scare the pants off the Dursleys," Ron decided, nodding his head.

"Do you know when you'll be back?" Hermione worriedly asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry honestly answered. "I don't know what I have to do at the bank."

Harry headed for the stairs to the dorm, hoping he could remember where the key for his vault was.

"You can copy my notes for astronomy then," Hermione decidedly said. Harry paused, before shaking his head. Of course she'd be worried about him missing class.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry smiled.

...

Snape stood at the outside doors of the castle, watching over the path that led to the gates at the bottom of a gentle hill. The Forbidden Forest, still dark and menacing despite the late afternoon sun overhead, seemed teeming with life as sounds and rustles escaped from it. He checked the watch on his wrist, irritated by the small burn marks left in his skin from the venom. Potter was late, by two minutes.

When they boy finally arrived, he was half out of breath and struggling to put his travelling school cloak on. His hair was mussed, glasses skewed, and he looked apoplectic.

"Are the Dursleys trying to steal my money?" Potter demanded, yanking his cloak over his shoulder and fumbling the clasp.

"Not so loud, Potter," Snape immediately said, looking about. There weren't any students around though, as it was a free hour before dinner and the cool end of February air was still too crisp to be hanging about outside.

"I won't stand for it," Potter growled, shaking his hand away as his fingers were snapped up in the clasp. "They're not getting a knut."

"Oh for," Snape leaned forward and swatted Harry's hands, doing up the clasp in two seconds. "Let's go. We have an appointment."

"An appointment?" Harry asked, stomping after Snape as they made their way to the front gates. "Uncle Vernon made an appointment to meet with *goblins*?"

Snape huffed and slashed his wand as they approached the gate, barely pausing to allow the gate to creak open.

"The appointment has nothing to do with your uncle," Snape said, grabbing Harry's arm. They twisted into apparition before Harry could ask anything further.

Landing in Diagon Alley near the bank, Harry took a deep breath and steadied himself, trying to not sick up.

"Wait," Harry said, staring at the ground as Snape impatiently urged him on. After another minute, when Harry was certain that his lunch was going to stay down, he gave Snape a small nod.

"Okay, we can go," Harry said, holding his hand over his stomach. He ignored the rolling of Snape's eyes. "We're not meeting Uncle Vernon?"

The bank was rather full inside, lots of wizards and wizards checking deposits of their pay packets and paying bills before going home for the day. Harry noticed two or three of the goblins giving them a suspicious look as Snape lead them confidently to a small door at the side of the main atrium.

"Don't be ridiculous Potter. Dursley doesn't know a thing about your vault. He wouldn't know his arse from a hole in the ground."

Harry's jaw dropped for a second and he stared at Snape.

"What about the solicitor Dumbledore mentioned?"

"Money is a very effective bribe to have someone write a false claim letter. Don't forget that," Snape remarked. The door flashed at them, and before Harry realised it, Snape leaned over and hoisted him up into the air. There was a small black rectangle on the door, and once he'd been seen through it, Harry was put back down.

"Don't speak until spoken to," Snape murmured, walking through the door. They went down two hallways and into a cramped little office owned by a hideous looking goblin that had a nameplate on his desk reading 'Tadgh.'

"Professor Snape," the goblin said, extending his grubby fingers. His nails were long enough to be classified as talons, and Harry twisted his face up at them. Snape didn't even pretend to offer his own hand to shake.

"Tadgh," Snape said, managing it somehow. Harry had no clue how to pronounce the name, even after hearing Snape say it. "I am in need of two small daggers."

The goblin's eyes lit up as he looked between them, no doubt calculating what sort of profit he could make.

"Of course. Jewel encrusted? Wand length? Solid gold? Only the finest, of course," Tadgh said, waving his talons over his messy desk. Harry supposed that somewhere under there were materials to make daggers and swords.

"*Jewel* encrusted?" Snape scoffed, sneering at the goblin. "Solid gold? The boy is eleven, and a scrawny thing to boot. Do you want him knifed by some little rotter looking for a flashy souvenir?"

The insult seemed to roll off the goblin's back like water off a duck's, but Harry could see in his eyes that he was a bit rattled by Snape.

"Something more deceptive, then?"

"Yes," Snape immediately answered, leaning against the wall. There were two chairs in the room, both goblin sized and both covered in papers and random books that looked like they had very little to do with money.

"It'll be something both Harry and I will need to carry at all times. It will need to be a maximum of seven inches, smaller for him, and it should not be immediately recognized as a dagger."

Harry blinked in surprise at hearing Snape say his first name, and without derision in his tone. The goblin seemed to think the familiarity was normal, and his arrogance was starting to fade as he wrote the notes down on a notepad.

"Material?"

Harry watched Tadgh as he wrote, not understanding a word of the written Gobbledegook.

"Silver," Snape said, as if there were no other option. "Covered in leather."

This got Tadgh's attention, and he looked up.

"Covered in leather, that'll make an ugly dagger."

"But a nice watch," Snape countered, staring down at the goblin. "I'm quite certain you creative goblins can forge a dagger that can be worn easily as a watch, and comes rigidly to function at the whisper of a spell."

Harry looked up admiringly at Snape. Never in ten years would he have thought to fashion a dagger out of a watch. It apparently impressed the goblin as well, or he was merely looking forward to the challenge.

"Return in a month, and your watches shall be finished. First week of April."

"A month?" Harry blurted. Snape cut him a glare, and the goblin gave him a nasty smile.

"These sorts of creations take time, Mr Potter," Tadgh said.

"And cost money," Snape said, moving the conversation back along. "What's your price?"

"A hundred galleons," Tadgh immediately replied. "Each."

"No," Snape replied. "Seventy."

"Rubbish. If you want quality, you'll pay for it. Ninety-five, and nothing less," Tadgh grunted.

Harry watched the dealing go back and forth, absolutely fascinated. Snape stood impassively by the door, unlike Tadgh, who was very animated in his own gestures.

"Seventy-five galleons, four and sixteen. Or I find another goblin."

"No one else will make it on your timeline, or as discreetly," Tadgh arrogantly said.

"Likely not," Snape agreed. He put his hand on the back of Harry's neck and steered him toward the door. "Good day."

The hallway was brightly lit and empty as they walked back to the door that had let them in. Harry kept waiting to hear the Tadgh's footsteps, but he didn't hear anything as they made it to the door. He was surprised, as a goblin-made weapon was something they rather needed.

Snape opened the door confidently though, and stepped back into the main atrium of the bank. He kept his head held high, and continued to guide Harry to the front doors, ignoring how some of the customers in the bank stared at Harry and his scar.

Tadgh was waiting by the very last pillar.

"Eighty-three, seven and fourteen. Final offer."

Snape considered this with a gloriously bored look on his face.

"Eighty-five flat. And permanent ownership until it's destroyed, no goblin ownership rules."

"Fine," Tadgh grumbled.

"Very well," Snape said, pleased. "If you'll see us to our vaults, you will be paid."

...

One of Tadgh's assistants, a monstrous looking goblin with a poorly fitted suit and a large gash down the side of his face, arranged to take them to their vaults. Snape's was first, closer to the top than Harry's was, and Harry remained behind the door while Snape gathered the money he needed. Snape's actions were quite protective, and Harry didn't feel like getting yelled at by a paranoid and insecure Professor Snape.

The trip to his own vault was even shorter, and Harry was happy to see that there didn't even appear to be a dent made in his pile of galleons. He pocketed more than enough for the dagger and some 'just in case' money, and got back into the cart. Harry was happy that the Dursleys had no idea about his money, and that they'd ordered weapons to destroy the horcruxes. He wasn't prepared for Snape to hit the assistant goblin with the imperius curse just before the cart started up again.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Harry yelled, turning to stare at Snape's focused face.

"Take us to the Lestrage Vault," Snape commanded, stepping into the cart behind Harry.

"Snape!" Harry tried again, as the cart zoomed down the track and the lantern hanging off the front swung dangerously. Harry was rather grateful to note that this time they did not pass through the Thief's Downfall.

"Do you remember where the goblet is?" Snape asked, leaning forward to speak near Harry's ear. "It's prudent we exit as quickly as possible."

The cart started to slow down as it twisted through the narrow tunnels. He didn't know how far down they were, but Harry could hear the clanking of the chains that the dragon wore.

"Why didn't you tell me we were breaking into Gringotts?" Harry demanded, ignoring Snape's question.

The cart came to a shuddering stop in front of a very familiar door, and Harry slowly got out of the cart. Snape was already out, guiding the goblin toward the ornately carved door.

"Because Potter, I have come to the conclusion after years of study that you tend to be more successful if flying by the seat of your pants," Snape tetchily replied.

"No! I'm not!" Harry argued. The goblin serenely raised his palm to the door, and the locks could be heard twisting apart. "I usually have a plan. It never turns out quite right, but I have one."

"I'll remember that in the future," Snape dismissively said.

"Planning came in handy in the Chamber of Secrets," Harry grunted, stepping into the vault and being extremely careful to stay in the centre of the floor space. He turned to tell Snape the same thing, but Snape was already reaching toward an ugly silver cup.

Levicorpus! Harry thought, flicking his wand instantly. Snape flew upward in a flurry of robes, and when he spun to face Harry, had an expression of fury on his face.

"Put. Me. Down," Snape hissed, spittle coming out of his lips.

"I will," Harry immediately said. "But you can't touch anything. Everything here duplicates and burns you at a single touch."

Snape still looked livid, but he didn't hex Harry once he'd been returned to the ground. Harry immediately focused on the cup, hoping to distract Snape from thoughts of revenge.

"It's up there," Harry said, pointing at the top of a cabinet in the back of the vault, where he'd found the cup before. He felt a huge amount of relief seeing it still there.

"Everything duplicates?" Snape asked, his arms crossed and the lines on his face tight and pronounced.

"Think so," Harry said. "Though the cup didn't."

Snape handed him a bag that was normally used for collecting ingredients. It was made of thick leather, and had some mud stains on it.

"Fetch, Potter," Snape said, levitating Harry off the ground with a flick of his wrist. He wasn't upside down, but Snape wasn't the most smooth at manoeuvring people in the air.

"Are you playing Hangman?" the goblin asked, watching with placid amusement as Harry floated dangerously close to the rough ceiling of the vault.

"In a way," Snape smirked.

Harry was mentally cursing Snape as he used his wand to push the goblet into the bag. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally touch it and be as affected by it as he was with the diadem.

"What's your plan to get out of here, *Professor*?" Harry asked, with as much sarcasm as he could master on the title. Snape was only slightly gentler bringing him back to the doorway.

"The goblin," Snape said, as if Harry were daft. They made their way back to the cart and climbed inside, Snape in the back, Harry in the middle, and the goblin up front.

Halfway back to the atrium of Gringotts, Harry saw Snape's arm reach over his shoulder and pour an excessive amount of murky liquid out of a tiny bottle, all over the back of the goblin's shoulders.

"Finite incantatem," Snape whispered. Harry's eyes widened at the mess made of the goblin's outfit, but Snape wasn't finished.

"Potter!" he bellowed near Harry's ear, making Harry wince and the goblin slow the cart to look at him. The goblin gave Harry a dirty look when he realized that the back of his jacket was all wet.

"Motion sickness," Snape explained with exasperation. "If you'll permit me?"

Snape held up his wand, and at the goblin's nod, banished the mess. Harry was immensely curious to Snape's reasoning, and it took him the rest of the ride to figure out that Snape's wand would now have a cleaning spell on it for *priori incantatem*, instead of the *imperius* curse.

...

The sun was setting over the peaks of the buildings in Diagon Alley, and even though it was chilly out, Harry didn't feel quite like going back to Hogwarts yet. Snape didn't either, as he suggested a warm dinner at a pub on the muggle side of the gateway. Shepherd's pie was the agreed upon choice, and their booth was enshrouded with the muffliato spell as the waitress walked off.

"Where are you going to keep that, if we can't destroy it for a month?" Harry asked, sipping the milk that had been brought to the table. Curiously, Snape had not ordered alcohol with his meal, as Harry thought he might have.

"In a lead box, in the lab," Snape answered, glancing in the rucksack the goblet was in. "I want to know what memories this one reveals, but I have no desire to transport your unconscious body back to Hogwarts. Not until after I've finished my dinner."

"That's nice," Harry sarcastically said. Dinner arrived shortly after, and conversation was halted as it was consumed. Harry with the gusto of a growing boy, and Snape like a man who hadn't had many good sit down meals in a while. Once it was mostly done, Snape brought out his notebook again.

"Once the daggers are completed, we will imbue them with the basilisk venom. I assume from there it is merely a matter of destroying the horcruxes with the daggers?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, wiping his mouth with his serviette. "Sort of. You said they fight back violently when they go into the container? It's the same coming out."

"Wonderful," Snape said.

"I think we should hold off on getting any more until we destroy these two. They leech things out of the people holding them, I don't want to know what they'd do all together in a room."

Snape looked thoughtful, before nodding.

"Three left to find then, before you are returned to the Dursleys."

"I'm not going back," Harry strongly said, looking up from the menu. "I refuse to be starved or locked up again all summer."

"As much as I personally find Petunia Dursley abhorrent, Potter, they're your legal guardians," Snape said, rolling his eyes. "You have no choice."

"Yes, I do. I have money," Harry said. "And it's only for the summer, I'll live with the Weasleys if I have to. Or, or I'll stay at Grimmauld Place if I need..."

Harry trailed off and his fork clattered to the table. Snape gave him a worried look, snapping his fingers in front of Harry's face.

"Potter? Is there a horcrux there?"

"Yes," Harry answered, his eyes focusing on Snape again as he blinked the moisture in them away. "But that's not...it's Sirius' house. Sirius is still alive."

Chapter 4

Severus Snape was not a pleasant man on the best of days, but especially not after a goblin deal, bank robbery, and chaotic game of hide-and-go-apparate. Potter, the bundle of unplanned action that he sometimes was, had fled the restaurant in search of Sirius Black. He'd first gone to Diagon Alley, but upon realising that Azkaban was not easily accessible for visitors (especially eleven year old students), he'd gone to the Muggle entrance of the Ministry of Magic, and then finally to Grimmauld Place. Snape had followed along crossly, thanks to a tracking spell he'd cast on the boy's glasses when he'd passed out touching the diadem, and finally nabbed Potter in front of Grimmauld's.

"Have you lost your mind?" Snape growled, holding tightly to the white tipped collar of Potter's uniform shirt.

"I need to figure out a way to break Sirius out of Azkaban," Potter said, struggling against Snape's hold.

"That's not going to happen *tonight*, Potter," Snape answered, his grip strong.

"I have to," Potter insisted, turning to glare at Snape. "We've been back for two weeks, and I've just left him there."

"Another day won't do any harm, in theory," Snape dryly pointed out. "A rescue mission from you will blow our entire cover."

Huffing, Harry turned and glared at the gate between Number 11 and Number 13. He looked rather constipated as he concentrated on it, and Snape leaned over after a moment to speak.

"Now that you've proven neither of us are on the wards, we will be returning to Hogwarts."

"No, I'm going to get him out tonight," Potter argued, trying to pull away from Snape. There was a jogger passing them by on the street, but was too absorbed in his music player to pay much mind to either Snape or Harry.

"Potter!" Snape growled, pulling him close. "Think ahead! Black will be extremely suspicious and boisterous if you release him now, and that will not help us retrieve the horcrux here."

Before Harry could form a response to that, Snape had apparated them right to the gate's edge of Hogwarts. They'd taken a step onto Hogwarts grounds before Harry could apparate himself away, and the gate closed.

"You don't want me to rescue him," Potter accused, his stride small as he stormed ahead of Snape. "You want him to stay in Azkaban."

"Even though you and your little friends uncovered Pettigrew as the murderer of the Muggles, there is still the case of attempted murder that Black is guilty of," Snape nastily

replied. He stuck his arm out and pointed at a smaller and darker stairwell to the side of the grand staircase hallway. "Go to the dungeons."

"For what? When you were sixteen? Blimey Snape, people change as they get older," Harry replied, heading for the dungeons without thinking to disobey. Snape's icy voice followed him down the stairs.

"You know as well as I that he hasn't," Snape snapped. He was stalking behind Harry, his long swirling robes mostly blocking Harry from anyone who happened to glance down the halls.

...

The goblet sat before them on the coffee table, its dull sheen glowing warm from the fire. Snape had placed it there, and once again only felt touches of dark magic, nothing more. Potter had flopped onto the chesterfield he normally sat on, still angry, though he had quickly grasped the knit blanket to wrap around himself and settle in.

"So I write him letters, introduce myself, see if it'll get him to respond, and then we'll break him out," Potter was saying, scribbling furiously into a notebook. Snape had finished taking measurements of the horcrux moments before, and was sketching it into his own workbook.

"I agreed to nothing of the sort," Snape said.

"So you'll just let him rot in gaol, for a prank he played against you?" Potter said, getting properly riled up the way that Snape remembered from teaching the boy occlumency lessons. "That's a bit immature, isn't it?"

"I don't call attempted murder a prank, Mr Potter," Snape said, glaring at him. The room was warm again, and Snape was sitting in his favourite chair, using the footstool as a small desk for his only two books that mentioned horcruxes.

"I don't think he actively set out to kill you," Potter scoffed, much like the way any teenager did when searching for an excuse for their stupid behaviour.

"What other reason could anyone have for sending a classmate to face a fully transformed werewolf?" Snape asked, his tone blunt and hard.

"I don't know," Potter sighed. It sounded queer to Snape, the sigh of a worn man emitted from a tiny eleven year old. "I wouldn't have done it, not even to Malfoy."

"Oh, how interesting," Snape commented smugly. "Werewolves are far too violent, but unknown curses marked solely for enemies are acceptable. What intriguing insight into the morals of the Boy Who Lived."

Chastised, Potter's cheeks burned as he stared at Snape's dark eyes. Neither looked away from the other, but Potter spoke first.

"I never meant to kill him," Potter said, unblinking. "I only wanted to stop him from casting the cruciatus curse."

Snape paused his quill and stared at the small boy sitting on his chesterfield. Potter's hair was a wild mess, and his eyes were bright and darting around as they tried to interpret Snape's expression.

"I will only say this once," Snape quietly said. "Always ensure that the defense, or revenge, that you choose does not become your own downfall."

Potter's mouth closed abruptly as he took in the advice, and Snape changed the topic of conversation before Potter could ask about his own personal experience with that life lesson.

"Watch what you write in that letter. No one must know about the time travel, and that includes Black," Snape gravely said.

"We can trust him," Potter insisted, firing back up. A house elf knocked through the Floo and passed through a tray, filled with hot chocolate and pie from the kitchens. "Sirius won't ever tell."

"He most certainly will," Snape scoffed, leaning forward to grab a mug. "He didn't give a single thought to exposing his friend and schoolmate as a werewolf."

Outrage sparked on Potter face, and he pushed himself up to as tall a sitting position as he got. His hot chocolate was steaming in front of him, but he ignored it.

"You didn't either! You outed Remus at the end of third year!"

"Yes," Snape said, his eyes sparkling vengefully. "After endangering yourselves and the entire student population by forgetting his potion. My promise was broken the moment he neglected that."

Potter glared at him dubiously.

"So you ruined Remus' career because he forgot to take his Wolfsbane, not because you're a vengeful arse."

"Five points from Gryffindor," Snape smugly said, stirring his drink. "I warned you about the language."

...

Harry shook his head and picked up his notebook, turning over to a fresh page. In all likelihood, Snape and Sirius would never get along. They didn't in their regular time, and Harry knew they wouldn't in this time period either. To be fair though, Harry couldn't think of a situation where he'd ever want to work closely with Malfoy. They'd had a few moments, when Malfoy had lied to his parents at the Manor, and when Harry had pulled him out of the burning Room of Requirement. But they'd never get past a nod on the street, Harry didn't think.

Perhaps if he were lucky though, Snape would be able to hold back on hexing Sirius, having the future knowledge of what was to come in the war.

"Can I send mail to Azkaban?" Harry asked, unsure of what to write.

Snape picked up the goblet and squinted at it, trying to read the tiny inscription on the handle.

"Likely not."

Harry ignored him, crossing out a sentence he'd already written. What exactly was he to write to Sirius? In his old timeline, he hadn't a clue about Sirius until he was in third year. He didn't have an excuse for knowing Sirius was his godfather, and he technically was supposed to think what everyone else did; that Sirius Black betrayed the Potters and killed Peter Pettigrew. His page remained mostly blank, with Harry glaring at it in frustration. He couldn't very well write 'Dear Mr Black, I've heard you were my godfather, and that you've also killed thirteen people and sent my parents to their deaths. Is it true?'

"I wish to see the horcrux memories," Snape said, tapping his quill nib against his own notebook and breaking Harry's thoughts.

"I don't know what this one has, Ron and Hermione were the ones to destroy it," Harry said, staring at the goblet. He was rubbing his forearms, his hands jammed up his sleeves, as he looked at it. The notebook lay on his lap, more crossed out lines than not.

"Nonetheless," Snape continued, nodding toward it. "I believe it will be useful to see."

"Why do you trust me so much all of a sudden?" Harry asked, his voice soft.

Snape dropped the quill and turned slightly toward the fire, the flames flickering yellow in his black eyes.

"The moment you walked into the Shack, after the Dark Lord left," Snape replied, his bland tone masking any emotion. "I knew you were a man of your word, like I."

Harry sat back against the couch, the hot chocolate warming his tiny hands as his body relaxed. In all of his school years, even receiving praise for conjuring a patronus didn't match to the pride he felt from Snape's words.

"Just to warn you, it might knock me out again," Harry said, recapturing Snape's attention. He held out his hand and waited for Snape to grasp it.

"You're small enough to not do much damage," Snape answered, gripping Harry's arm firmly.

The sickening feeling was even worse this time, and Harry felt his dinner from earlier churning in his stomach. Images flashed through his mind, Hepzibah Smith in her home, surrounded by a cluttered trove of long forgotten collectables, an elderly house elf, and the impeccably dressed Tom Riddle. A violent wrenching sound tore through Harry's mind, and he suddenly saw black clouds of the horcrux pulling forth out of the dead woman's mouth. The clouds swirled around Tom Riddle, trying to suffocate him, before he forced it - shrieking - into the cup. Harry heard Riddle's triumphant laughter again, and he fought to drop the horcrux.

Harry sat back, letting the cup clang to the hard stone floor. He shivered on the chesterfield, his younger body unable to keep itself warm, or rid itself of the evil feeling from the pit of his stomach. Snape was writing furiously in his notebook, his own hand shaking as he scrambled to write down everything they'd seen.

"Going to fall?" Snape asked, writing another sentence.

"No, I'm sitting," Harry said slowly. "I feel really dirty." He shook his head, to clear the images from his mind, but his ears were slightly fuzzy and it felt weird.

Deciding he'd had enough, and to return to the tower dormitory to take a shower, Harry stood up slightly too fast. The blood rushed to his head and his knees started to give out as he tried to stand.

Snape's hands were suddenly on him, and Harry felt himself being pulled back to his feet.

"I'm fine," Harry said, trying to shake off Snape's grip. A strong shiver went through him as Snape half-steered, half-carried him toward the red army cot behind the chesterfield.

"Was that worse or easier than the diadem?" Snape asked, pulling Harry's glasses off. His thumbs held Harry's eyelids down, as he checked Harry's pupils.

"Worse," Harry said, trying to get rid of the mental image of the horcrux being formed. "Did you see? Her body?"

Snape nodded and handed the spectacles back. He held up Harry's arm, pressing two clammy-cold fingers to the inside of Harry's wrist. He was checking his watch on his other arm, and it took a few seconds for Harry to figure out that Snape was taking his pulse.

"The bed's still here," Harry said, looking down at it. It was very comfortable the last time he'd slept on it, and Snape's flat was very quiet and peaceful.

"Yes," Snape said, dropping Harry's arm. He seemed satisfied with the results of his medical check, and sat back onto the stool that was still near Harry's cot. He held up his wand, and a pair of children's pyjamas flew toward them from the direction of a small linen cupboard.

"Why does it affect me so much?" Harry yawned, reaching for a blanket to wrap himself in. He blinked dumbly as Snape tugged the blanket away and handed him the pyjamas.

"I suspect it feeds off the horcrux residing within you," Snape said, watching Harry untie his shoes. "Which is why it leaves you exhausted and dim-witted."

"I'm not dim-witted," Harry growled, though his speed at getting his shoes off negated the statement.

"Stand up, arms out," Snape said, motioning up with his wand. Harry just managed to get his arms up when Snape did the spell to switch his clothes. It was an odd feeling, and the pyjamas were a bit cool against his already chilled skin.

"Of course you aren't," Snape retorted. "Do you want the potion from last time?"

Harry flopped back onto the cot and shoved his feet under all the blankets.

"No, I'll just take a quick kip," Harry said, falling back onto the pillow. He'd already closed his eyes before he remembered his glasses. Hoping they'd hit the throw rug and not the stone floor, he took them off and blindly let go. Harry didn't hear the glasses land, but he did feel the weight of another blanket dropped on him.

The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was mentally picturing himself crushing the horcrux while riding on the back of the Basilisk.

....

Curious, Snape took the goblet with him as he headed into his private lab. The wards on his flat would confirm if Potter woke up any time soon, but Snape was quite certain the boy would sleep for at least two hours.

The diadem, which they'd found now two weeks earlier and had yet to destroy, was encased in a solid lead box, on the lower shelf of Snape's bookcase. It had remained there without incident, until Snape approached with the goblet. It wasn't quite like a magnetic attraction, but Snape could feel a pull from the goblet toward the diadem. Potter had never mentioned any such possibility, but then again, he'd also never said that he'd been in possession of more than one horcrux at a time.

Securing the goblet in a similar container, but stashing it in an empty storage cupboard at the end of the hall, Snape returned to the living room. Nothing could be done about the horcruxes until their daggers were ready, and that would be in another two weeks. Snape just had to make certain that Quirrell wouldn't be able to reach the Philosopher's Stone in that time, a task that wasn't quite as easy as it seemed. There was no telling just how much their arrival back in time had changed, and Snape didn't want to take the chance that Quirrell would be successful in his quest.

He sat back down in his favourite chair, lifting his feet up to rest them on the ottoman. Then again, if they managed to stop Quirrell, there was still the small matter of the horcrux left in Potter's scar, and where the non-entity of the Dark Lord would disappear to once his host body was destroyed.

Snape sat back in his chair and rolled his shoulders, working out the knotted tension. He was far too old and tired for war games. Spotting Potter's notebook on the coffee table, Snape summoned it wordlessly.

The letter was on the topmost page, and Snape read it quickly as Potter murmured in his sleep behind the chesterfield.

"Dear Mr Black,

I've been told that you're my godfather, and that you were best friends with my Dad when you were growing up. If that's true, why did you betray my parents? Why did you tell Voldemort where to find us? And how could you kill all those Muggles?

Some of the stories told now seem so wild that they can't be true. What really happened?

Sincerely,

H. Potter."

Snape smirked and glanced toward the chesterfield, where Potter was hidden. The letter was rather brilliantly written - open and accusing enough to spark an outraged response from Black, and just doubtful enough that Black would think he had a chance to convince Potter that he was innocent. Snape was impressed. He carefully removed the page from the notebook, closing the book and tossing it back toward the coffee table. He'd send the boy back up to the tower toward midnight, but for now wanted to unwind. The letter was folded, and placed into Snape's pocket as he relaxed back into his chair with a book for distraction.

...

Azkaban was on a miserable little rock of an island in the North Sea. It was impossible to fly to on a broom, there were anti-apparition wards surrounding it, and the only way to get there safely was by Ministry-sanctioned portkey. Visitors were welcomed, if they could get there. While Snape had never fully enjoyed it, one of the most useful skills he'd learned as a Death Eater was how to fly. Considered a circus trick by the other Death Eaters, Snape had been the only one to perfect it beyond mere levitation. When he arrived at Azkaban though, robes sodden and hair messed due to wind, he was not in the friendliest of moods.

Nonetheless, one of the junior aurors on shift led him to a little used meeting room. It had a cage across the back end with a bench inside, and three plush chairs around the visitor's side. The cage door was open, as if Black would be brought in through the regular door first. When he was, he was dirty, half deranged, and cursing his guards. Snape couldn't help smiling.

"Snivellus Snape," Black said, laughing to himself as he stepped into the room. He sounded remarkably like his demented cousin, Bellatrix.

"Black," Snape replied, staying near the back of the room in anticipation of sudden movement.

"Come to taunt me, have you?" Black asked, still smirking as he was led to the cage.

There was a sudden howl as Black broke out of the grasp of the younger auror, charging at Snape with an impressive speed for someone who'd spent ten years in a prison cell.

Snape had experienced a bit more of life in that time period though, and was no longer a lanky boy that flinched from his father or bullies. He side-stepped quickly enough that Black's flying fist sailed harmlessly through the air, and brought his elbow up in time to connect with Black's nose. The man went down with a groan, and Snape watched passively as Black was dragged to the cell and locked in.

"Ten years, and you've almost gone feral," Snape replied, sounding almost bored. For the entire flight to Azkaban Snape had reviewed what he could remember of the incident in the

Shrieking Shack, when he'd let his hatred of Black blindside him.

"What do you want?" Black breathed heavily.

"Perhaps a favour," Snape suggested, watching with amusement as Black's face contorted.

"A favour? I'd rather see you rot in here with me for the rest of our lives," Black said, enjoying the idea of power over Snape.

"Be careful Black, your fleas are showing," Snape softly said, his voice low and his eyes burning. "You forget that in order to betray the Potters, the secret keeper showed his face amongst some of the Death Eaters."

"And you'd know, wouldn't you?" Black jeered, gripping the bars of the cell. He had blood running out of his nose, and occasionally spit some of it to the floor. "Voldemort's right hand man, probably laughed the entire time he was telling you where they were."

"*Laughed?* Haven't you ever wondered how the Potters had been given warning that he was coming? How Dumbledore had known?" Snape asked, smiling in a malicious and triumphant way.

Black stared at him openly for a minute, processing what Snape had said, before his face twisted up again in disgust.

"You ruddy turncoat," Black sneered, spittle passing through the bars. "I don't care what Dumbledore says, you're a sneak, a thief, and a murderer."

"Yes, well, the opinion of a man *serving* time for murder concerns me so much," Snape immediately replied.

This comment seemed to enrage Black again, and for a second, Snape wondered if he'd ever known before seeing that newspaper in Potter's third year that he'd not successfully killed Pettigrew.

"He betrayed my friends. He deserved to die," Black growled, with absolute conviction. It was clear that he had zero regrets for his vengeance.

"Justice that only you could provide?" Snape asked, as if talking to a particularly dumb student.

"I couldn't leave him to the aurors," Black snapped, not letting Snape finish. "Everyone thought I was the secret keeper, only I knew it was Pettigrew!"

"That's what veritaserum is for, you half-wit," Snape sneered, leaning closer. "But no, brave Sirius Black went out to the Muggle world to seek his own justice, with nary a thought for Potter."

"I avenged my friends, James and Lily," Black gritted, pulling himself to height. "Which is more than you'll ever do."

"I beg to differ," Snape scoffed, narrowing his eyes. "I am referring to Harry Potter, your famous godson."

Black stepped back slightly in surprise, before furrowing his brow and studying Snape suspiciously.

"What do you care about Lily's son?"

"I don't," Snape irritably replied. "But I have to teach the little cretin, and somehow he learned of you."

"He's not a cretin!" Black immediately denied, pointing a filthy finger at Snape.

"Oh how would you know?" Snape huffed, withdrawing Potter's letter from his pocket. "You took off in search of revenge for two people who were already dead, leaving the boy with his Muggle relatives."

"No," Black shook his head, pacing in his cell. "I tried to take him, but Hagrid said he was to go to them. Dumbledore's orders. I wanted him to go to Remus or I."

Black's hazel eyes were strong, bright, and slightly crazed as they focused on Snape again.

"I'm certain that even after your past decade as a guest at Azkaban, you have not forgotten that Lupin is a werewolf," Snape icily said.

Black gave him a malicious smile, and Snape decided to cut his visit short. He would have been happy to leave the mongrel at Azkaban, but he knew Potter would never abandon his godfather.

Stepping up to the bars of the cage, Snape unfolded the letter Potter had written. He dropped it, along with a spare sheet of paper and a standard student's pencil, on the floor in front of the cage.

"Read the letter. You have twenty minutes to respond to it."

When Snape collected the response, he wiped the grime from the room off his robes and looked down at Black. Black was more subdued, and appeared to be plotting something. An improvement, and more useful for his own escape than his enraged idiocy at the beginning of the visit.

"Pity you've never had sufficient motivation to leave," Snape said, planting a seed. "I've heard even a dog can find it's own way home."

Snape walked toward the door, signalling to the auror in the viewing window that he was done.

"Have you?" Black asked, and Snape could hear the determination in his response.

...

Snape had never bothered to purchase his own owl, as he'd never had enough friends to correspond with. For potions he could order in person, by Floo, or by school owl, and the only people who sent him a Christmas gift lived at Hogwarts as well. Therefore, when the small school barn owl fluttered into the Great Hall and flew toward Potter, Snape knew for certain that not even Potter would suspect it was from him. Snape calmly returned to buttering his dinner roll, only half listening to Flitwick as the small professor talked about changes to head of house duties. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Potter opened Black's response, smiling brightly as he read it. Both Granger and Weasley were curious about it, but Snape had made sure to charm the letter illegible to anyone else.

As much as he hated Black, he knew that Potter idolized his godfather. Sirius Black would be good motivation for Potter to help Snape finish off the horcruxes, but Snape was only concerned that Potter would attach himself too fast to this Black and history - or the future, in their case - would repeat itself. When Potter had first gone through his years at Hogwarts, Snape's concern for the boy's welfare had been put to the side, more so because Snape was busy walking his own tight line. But as tired as he was now, having to go through the years again just the two of them, Snape could conclude in his own mind that Potter had suffered enough too.

Deciding to leave dinner early, Snape left the table quietly and headed for the empty library. He was covertly browsing for books regarding time travel, a subject of which he'd never had much particular interest in before, when Dumbledore approached silently.

"If you need extra time to prepare your examinations, I'm afraid I cannot move the due date," Dumbledore said, his smile kind.

"When have I ever been remiss in submitting examinations on time?" Snape countered, opening the book to see if the table of contents revealed anything useful.

"Not once in ten years," Dumbledore immediately responded. Snape waited quietly for the real topic of conversation to present itself. "Care for coffee?"

...

The headmaster's office was mostly quiet in the evening, when Fawkes was out on his hunt. There were stacks of books on the desk, most written in languages Snape recognized only in passing. A pensive shimmered in a closed glass cabinet by the west window, and Snape noted a stack of *Daily Prophet* crosswords in the centre of the desk, which were gaily rearranging themselves.

"Have you uncovered anything regarding Quirrell?" Dumbledore asked, cutting quickly to the point.

"Nothing concrete," Snape answered, standing by the bookcase and inspecting the headmaster's collection. "I am certain he is after the Stone though, and I believe he is quizzing the staff on their enchantments."

"I see," Dumbledore said, striking his beard. "Keep further watch then. We need only keep the Stone here until August, when Nicolas returns for it."

"I shall assume then," Snape lightly said, checking a book on common Muggle poisons, "that you have employed proper security measures, and not just a simple obstacle course?"

"You may assume," Dumbledore answered, sounding amused. "I do have another concern I would like you to look into, regarding Harry Potter."

"I believe you're slightly mistaken," Snape sarcastically said. "Mr Potter, thankfully, is not a member of my house."

"Severus," Dumbledore warned. "The Easter holidays are almost upon us, and young Mr Malfoy has gleefully been reminding Harry that his parents are no longer alive. Such pernicious callousness can leave quite an emotional impact."

"Mr Malfoy is an eleven year old boy with an overinflated ego and a large arrogant streak," Snape dismissively said. "That being said, no, I have not noticed, nor paid any attention to, any signs of depression from Potter."

"Hmm," Dumbledore nodded, mostly to himself.

"He does have Petunia's family, does he not?" Snape asked, baiting. He knew perfectly well what a putrid waste of space Petunia had been as a child, but didn't know much about the large uncle and fat boy. After teaching Potter legilimency though, he had his suspicions.

"His family has other obligations this holiday, I believe," Dumbledore vaguely answered, in the tone he used when he was embarrassed and wrong.

"The rumours are true then," Snape stated, crossing his arms slowly. "The family hates him and the boy slept in a cupboard for eleven years."

"Ten," Dumbledore sighed. "I left him on the doorstep when he was fifteen months old."

"I believe in the Muggle world that would be considered child abuse," Snape blandly said, though he knew that Dumbledore was aware of his displeasure.

"I did not say it was my best idea, but it did keep him safe," Dumbledore conceded. "I am happy to hear though that you care about Harry, now that you've met..."

"Care?" Snape raised his eyebrow. "I don't believe you've forgotten I made a promise to protect that boy at all costs. You'll forgive me if finding out he was raised by a family who considered him to be unwanted rubbish irritates me."

Dumbledore said nothing, and Snape pushed a tiny bit more.

"And you knew."

"I cannot change what has been done," Dumbledore quietly said, "and I request that you do not either." He nodded at the books in Snape's arms, some of which were regarding time travel.

"Harry is safe, and he is now at Hogwarts, which he considers home. It is the best I could hope for."

Snape wondered for a moment if Dumbledore knew what monsters lurked below the castle floors.

"In that case," Snape conceded, knowing when to quit, "I will watch the boy."

...

Harry had forgotten how meticulously organized Hermione was when it came to final exams. For an entire two weeks after his visit to Gringotts, she did nothing but remind them of how close the exams were. Ron, who had never really worried about exams until the week arrived, kept looking for excuses to play chess, or monitor Quirrell and Snape. Harry found himself worrying over his notes though, as it had been a long time since he'd taken exams, and while he'd learned a lot of magic since then, he had to be careful to only mention first year spells and theory when he wrote. To escape the monotony of the rainy evening, Harry suggested they go visit Hagrid.

The hut was just as comfortable as Harry remembered, with fur lined rugs covering the large wooden floor, a merry fire spitting in the hearth, and Fang lying half out of his bed in the corner, drooling in his sleep. The room was unusually hot though, and Hagrid seemed to be cooking something over the fire. Harry stared at the pot, puzzled, before he noted the library books half hidden by a holey blanket on Hagrid's bed.

Hagrid wasn't cooking. Hagrid had gotten his dragon.

A heavy feeling settled in Harry's stomach as he remembered the fiasco of Norbert's escape the first time. As the tea was served at the table, some of it sloshing over the cups, Harry pointed at the cauldron.

"Hagrid, what's that?" Harry weakly asked.

"Oh that there," Hagrid said, stroking his beard. "That's a little gift I got from a friend down the pub."

Both Ron and Hermione pushed up from their chairs to peer into the pot, and Harry watched as Hagrid nervously smiled.

"That's a dragon egg!" Ron exclaimed, his eyes wide. "Where did you get that?"

"A dragon egg?" Hermione repeated, half excited and half anxious. "Aren't those illegal?"

"Well, I won it, see," Hagrid proudly said. "Fair 'n square."

Harry half listened as Hagrid told the story of how he won the dragon's egg in a vicious round of cards down at The Hog's Head. Harry knew it was Quirrell who'd given up the egg, but it was quite clear that Hagrid had been telling the truth the first time it had happened; he'd been so excited to get the egg, that he didn't pay much attention to who was giving it to him.

Harry bit back a grin as he remembered how baby Norbert was so intent on ripping up the teddy bears, setting fire to Hagrid's beard, and Ron having to spend a week in the infirmary, from its bite. Harry blinked owlishly as Hermione peered over the cauldron at the black egg. Ron's infection had lasted an entire week from the dragon's poisonous bite. What if the poison could be used for something else?

Filling their pockets with some rock hard oatcakes that Hagrid had made, the three left his hut ten minutes later, promising not to tell about the dragon's egg. It wasn't too late yet, so instead of going to bed, Ron and Hermione squished into a big cushioned bench by the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room, while Harry sat in one of the leather chairs. Hermione was talking of reviewing further for exams, Ron was playing with the Dumbledore chocolate frog card, and Harry had pulled out his communication journal. His fingers played with the edges of the rough note he'd read several times and folded safely between the sheets of the journal. Sirius' note, and while Sirius hadn't written anything else, he'd told Harry that he'd figure out a way to prove his innocence.

"Are you sure this is the right Nicolas Flamel?" Ron asked for the fourth time in a week. "He's like, six-hundred years old."

"Thanks to the Philosopher's Stone," Hermione whispered, slipping into lecture mode. Harry shook his head, before writing in his book.

"Snape? Are you there?"

The journal remained cold as Harry listened to his friends debate over the Philosopher's Stone. They'd 'discovered' Flamel's name on the wizard card shortly after Harry had returned from his trip to the Chamber with Snape, and now were wondering what exactly was protecting the Stone.

"Harry?" Ron said, his voice disrupting Harry's wandering thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"What's in that book there? You're always writing in it, but it's not for class."

"No," Harry said, clutching the book tightly. He knew no one else could read it, but he still protected it. And he'd known that they would ask one day, so had made up a story to tell.

"Remember how Professor Dumbledore asked me not to search for the Mirror of Erised again?" Harry asked, looking between his friends. Hermione's face softened, and Harry looked away.

"Instead of looking for my parents, I write in this," Harry lied. The notebook warmed in his hands, a sign that Snape had responded, but Harry kept it closed. He was surprised at how strong the pull was to read Snape's message.

Neither Ron nor Hermione had anything to say; they instead just stared at the fire. Harry, feeling guilty, opened the journal.

"Stupid question, Potter. I must be here in order to read your message and respond."

Harry bit back a smile.

"Do you think dragon venom, or dragon fire, would destroy them?"

"Who do you think gave Hagrid the, you know?" Hermione urgently whispered.

"Someone who doesn't like him that much," Ron scoffed. "If he gets caught with one of those, he'll face huge fines."

"What is your fascination with deadly creatures?"

"Seems to be the best path to destruction," Harry immediately wrote back. He closed the journal again, and added to the conversation about the dragon.

"We know Hagrid won't want to give it up, and he can't keep it here," Harry started. "It won't take Dumbledore long to realise there's a dragon at Hogwarts."

"I don't think it would take anyone long to realise that," Ron said. Harry felt the journal grow warm as Snape replied something, but he left it shut.

"What about Charlie?" Harry asked. Ron gave him a very confused look.

"How would Charlie know about it?"

"I think he means could Charlie take the dragon," Hermione clarified, rolling her eyes.

Ron looked excited about that idea, and Harry was reminded of how much Ron idolized his older brothers, even though he outwardly complained about having to live up to their accomplishments.

"Yeah, I reckon he could," Ron replied. "He's always talking about how they take in dragons at the reserve, ones that lived too close to Muggles."

The journal in Harry's hand was rather hot now, and he wondered how much Snape had written.

"We'll write him then," Harry said, with determination. "And then when the dragon is born, convince Hagrid to give it up."

"Good luck with that, Harry," Hermione doubtfully said.

"Gives us something to do while we wait to see if Quirrell holds up to Snape's interrogations," Ron said, scratching a note to his brother.

Harry had started to read the message from Snape, when he looked up at Ron.

"We don't know if it's him or not though."

"Harry," Ron said, his voice over exaggerating. "Snape's evil. It's got to be him."

Harry shook his head and read the reply.

"It's also the easiest way to trace someone. Even if it did work, dragons are rather hard to find by design, Potter. We are not breaking into Gringotts again."

When Harry hadn't answered, Snape had continued with his thoughts.

"Potter. Why were you thinking of dragon fire? If I recall correctly, you faced a dragon in your fourth year, not first."

There seemed to be a large inkblot after this, and then Harry's name, written strongly into the page.

"Who has the dragon, Potter?"

Harry smiled to himself. He regretted now that the last time they went through the war, how they'd ended up pitted against each other. Harry was sure that Snape had mostly chosen that route, to keep his position as a spy. Working with the man, which Harry could appreciate now that he was older, was much more fun.

"Technically it hasn't hatched yet."

...

Snape nodded his head politely at the gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's office, as he waited for the door to open. He'd never understood wizards and witches who treated less-sentient creatures, like gargoyles, as rubbish. Gargoyles were imbued with strong protective magic, and Snape had always been of the thought that it was best to keep on friendly terms with those who served to protect.

A lesson Potter could do in learning, he snidely thought. But that wasn't quite true either, as it was painfully obvious that Potter was as protective of his friends as they were of him. Now that Potter knew of Snape's loyalty to his mother and promise to protect the boy, Potter had even shown him care. Snape had been extremely surprised to see Potter's face as he'd lain dying in the Shrieking Shack, and only slightly less so again in the Forbidden Forest when they'd woken up. When Potter had again rushed to help him in the Chamber of Secrets, Snape had thought to himself that Potter might actually be worth trusting.

"Good evening, Severus," Headmaster Dumbledore said, sitting at his desk. Fawkes was preening himself on the stand, and gave Snape a very piercing look as he sat down.

"Headmaster," Snape said.

"How are your Slytherins?" Dumbledore was writing in an old and crumbling book, with a quill that glinted gold in the candlelight.

"Thriving," Snape answered. "However, I regret that I have little time to discuss them. Floo appointment at half eight."

Dumbledore waved his free hand over the desk in invitation.

"Mr Potter appears to be relatively happy, despite any bullying from any other student regarding his home life. He seems pleased to stay at the school over Easter."

Snape watched as Dumbledore nodded in satisfaction at this, and knew that the man's intent was not malicious. Snape himself as a student had considered Hogwarts home, and ever since his fateful return, had been welcomed with open arms.

"I have, however, noticed him rubbing his scar, often while in the presence of Quirrell. I was unaware that ordinary curse scars left a trace of foul magic in them."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, twirling one of the gadgets to his left.

"No one before Harry has ever survived the Killing Curse, so it is unknown what effects it would have, or how Quirrell would aggravate them," Dumbledore said. Snape couldn't tell if the headmaster had suspected already that there was a connection, or whether he was being truthful about not knowing.

"Do you suspect a residual link?" Snape bluntly asked, crossing his legs at the ankle.

"I don't believe Voldemort is truly gone," Dumbledore answered instead. "Consequently, if he does return, I do think that the scar will have some level of interaction with Voldemort's magic."

Snape nodded at this, raking his fingers through his hair once.

"Occlumency," Snape said, looking at the desk.

"I suspect it will be prudent for the boy to learn it," Dumbledore agreed.

"You should start now, before it is a necessity," Snape replied, standing to leave. He had just made it to the door before Dumbledore spoke up again.

"It won't be I that teaches him, Severus."

"Headmaster," Snape said, turning to face the desk. "Potter is an arrogant little child, and we barely tolerate each other. I am well aware of what him and his little friends think of me. To expect me to allow the possibility of such an intimate intrusion into my own mind while teaching him is preposterous."

"You'll manage. Your skills in occlumency bypass even mine, and I trust no other with the task," Dumbledore said with finality, looking at him with piercing blue eyes that hadn't been able to break through Snape's mental shields in years.

Chapter 5

In Harry's fifth year, Ron and Hermione had been revolted about the occlumency lessons he had to take, and the fact that Snape was teaching him. This time around the reaction was the same, except neither had the slight bit of comprehension they'd had the last time, when Harry had been suffering from Voldemort's visions. Not knowing Snape was in the Order of the Phoenix, or even what the Order was, likely contributed to the fact that they were very sympathetic to Harry's plight, even offering to petition Dumbledore for another solution.

Harry had feigned being brave and sacrificing though, and gone down for his first occlumency lesson on Monday evening. Snape's office was open - likely only to him - and empty, so Harry sat in the hard visitor's chair and looked around the room. It looked much like it normally did, the books on the shelves all potions or education related, a small amount of ingredients organized on some of the shelves, a full scale experiment of some sort set up on a table in the back of the room, and a large bowl of fruit on the round desk. Harry looked around to find the tea mugs with spoons still in them that he knew Snape regularly surrounded himself with, but evidently the man only did that in his own flat.

On second glance, Harry noticed that Snape's office, unlike his flat, had no real signs of the Muggle world in it. The clock in the corner was a magical one, currently stuck on 'Dinner', and the experiment at the back was quietly completing steps and mixing compounds regularly under a few well-cast spells. There wasn't a single biro or pencil on the desk, and even the landscape photographs on the wall lazily rotated through their animation, trees barely discernable as they swayed in the wind.

The door burst open as Harry was standing to go inspect the bookcase, and he dropped back into his seat with surprise. Snape stormed in, newspaper in his hand and a set look on his face.

"Through there," Snape instructed, pointing toward the hidden door to his flat.

Harry stopped to remove his shoes at the hallway door, hanging up his outer cloak before moving into the room. In his pocket he had a letter that he'd unfolded and read several times in the past half hour, and he was in a rather good mood.

"Sirius sent me a letter," Harry happily said.

"Did he now?" Snape replied, filling the kettle.

Snape had dropped the newspaper on the coffee table as he passed through to the kitchen, so Harry grabbed it as he plopped down on the couch. The front page was a very familiar image - Sirius Black holding up his prisoner number and screaming at the camera.

SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES AZKABAN

"He got out," Harry said, spreading out the paper and quickly scanning the article for details. "Did you help him?"

Snape was clanging something down in the kitchen, likely making tea, and looked over at Harry from the half wall separating the kitchen from living room.

"No."

Harry looked up in confusion as Snape brought tea back into the room.

"But I thought - I couldn't send a reply letter to him, because Azkaban doesn't get post. How did he get the first letter?"

"Magic," Snape deadpanned, drinking from his mug and again not removing the stirring spoon first.

Harry looked at him sceptically, certain that Snape had found a way to get the letter there.

"Do you think he's already at Grimmauld Place? Is there any way Dumbledore..." Harry started, putting the paper down.

"*Headmaster* Dumbledore," Snape interrupted. "And he will not let you leave Hogwarts in order to visit a convicted felon, Potter."

Harry twisted his face at that, and drew his feet up onto the chesterfield. He left his tea on the table to cool down.

"Harry. We're both from another time, I just - I feel more together when you call me Harry."

Snape stared at him.

"That's not a valid reason."

"No," Harry admitted. "But you say Potter with such loathing, and I don't feel like I know anyone here as well as I know you."

"I shall consider it," Snape said, sounding like he'd do anything but. He flicked his wand, and a small log floated over into the fireplace. Harry thought the room was warm enough, but Snape didn't seem to be bothered by the heat.

"Now," Snape said, serious and down to business. "Describe the locket."

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"Dumbledore warned me to watch out for Sirius Black this morning," Harry said, walking with Ron and Hermione toward the greenhouse entrance. "Even though he was my godfather, and my dad's best friend, Dumbledore said it was likely that Sirius was guilty."

It was getting easier and easier for Harry to lie to his friends, and he wasn't quite sure if he liked that change or not. Still, Harry was rather annoyed at himself for not predicting the events of earlier that morning. Ron and Hermione talked about what they'd looked up in the library about Sirius, while Harry mentally berated himself. Scabbers the rat had crawled all over the bedside cabinet between Ron and Harry's bed that morning, as it sometimes did, and

happened to walk across the copy of the *Evening Prophet*. Harry had dropped it there after returning from the dungeons the night before, forgetting that Scabbers could read.

Sloppy, Harry, Harry thought as he scowled. He was smart enough to figure out that there was a horcrux in Bellatrix Lestranger's vault for Pete's sake, he should have thought ahead. And now the rat was missing, having fled after reading about Sirius' escape.

"Did you eat something off this morning?" Ron asked, looking at Harry's scrunched up face.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "Just thinking about everything. What if he tries to contact me?"

"Tell Dumbledore," Hermione said, with absolute conviction. "Even You Know Who is afraid of him."

"Scabbers!" Ron blurted, bursting ahead of them. A few doors down the hall was his rat, frozen in place against the stone wall. Ron went charging after it, and Harry knew it wouldn't stay. Peter Pettigrew would try to run. Sure enough, by the time Ron had reached the last door and Harry had drawn his wand, the rat had sprung to life and darted off.

"Accio Scabbers!" Harry commanded, pleased when the furry little rodent flew through the air toward him. He didn't notice either Ron or Hermione's gobsmacked look until he caught Scabbers.

"Harry! Where did you learn that spell?" Hermione asked, astonished. "That's an upper year spell."

"My brothers don't even know that one yet," Ron added, looking a bit jealous. He moved to take Scabbers back, but was interrupted by a low voice from the shadows.

"A fifth year spell, how impressive Mr Potter," Snape said, stepping out into the light of one of the sconces. "Five points from Gryffindor, for using magic in the hallway."

Harry's lips thinned as he bit back a response, and he managed to keep quiet. Snape's gaze lingered on him a moment, before he looked down at the rat.

"And what is this?"

"That's mine, sir," Ron piped up, apparently not wanting Harry to lose any more points. "That's my rat, Scabbers."

"I see," Snape said, before holding out his hand. "First years are allowed an owl, a cat, or a toad. Nowhere on that list is a rat, Mr Weasley."

Harry handed Pettigrew over, amazed at Snape's ability to get what he wanted without arousing suspicion. Ron was mad, but he didn't suspect that Scabbers was anything else than a mangy rat.

"But he's mine, sir," Ron stubbornly said, no longer embarrassed about the scraggy condition of Scabbers.

"And perhaps if you speak nicely to the Headmaster, you may get it back," Snape nastily said, conjuring up a small cage and walking off with Pettigrew.

"Git," Ron muttered. "Probably just wanted a rat to experiment on."

Harry's eyes widened at the statement, and he allowed Hermione to usher him toward their next class.

"You're probably right, Ron," Harry said

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Snape, surprisingly, informed Dumbledore about Sirius Black's presumed innocence. He did so after a lengthy interrogation on Dumbledore's part, and admitted that he'd never seen Black at any Death Eater meetings. He did, however, quietly clearly remember Peter Pettigrew. This was naturally a lie, but it was enough to convince Dumbledore. Snape blandly claimed to have not come forward with the information previously as his own reputation was suffering, and he did want to see Black pay for at least one of his crimes.

Dumbledore was not happy, but Snape had skilfully reminded him that power could make a man do foolish things.

Harry had only heard part of the story, and was thusly surprised when the headmaster had agreed for him to meet Sirius Black, at Grimmauld Place. Harry, Dumbledore, and Snape all stood on the front step on Sunday evening, Snape with a scowl on his face, Harry trying to keep his excitement to a manageable level, and Dumbledore humming to himself.

"Remember, Severus," Dumbledore said, lightly tapping his fingers against his side. "Only enough veritaserum for the truth."

"Veritaserum?" Harry said, whipping his head to look at Snape.

Before Snape could say anything, the door was flung open and Sirius Black stood leisurely leaning against the frame. He wore deep red robes, a starched white shirt underneath, and his hair had been thoroughly washed. Harry fought his every instinct to burst forward and hug the man.

"Potter," Snape said, his eyes never leaving Sirius, "this waste of space is your godfather."

"Mr Black," Harry said, still sounding slightly too enthusiastic. "What happened to your nose?"

They'd been ushered in for tea, served by the muttering and foul-mooded Kreacher as Sirius told a grand tale of revenge and murder for the deaths of his two best friends. Harry suspected that as a young boy he was supposed to be taken in by the adventure and action of the story, but couldn't help comparing his own rash-actioned habits to Sirius'. Snape sat on the couch next to Harry, his arms crossed and his face set into a sneer as he listened to the story. Dumbledore appeared to be enthralled, though he did interject questions here and there.

Despite the obvious tension in the room though, Sirius was in a grand mood and kept giving Harry an easy smile throughout the conversation. He even agreed to take veritaserum (administered by Dumbledore, not Snape), so he could prove his innocence over the Potters' betrayal. After twenty minutes the truth was confirmed, and Dumbledore mentioned that Harry might like to stay with Sirius over the summer, though it would have to be rather kept a secret, as there was still the mess of the explosion and escape from Azkaban. Sirius was asked to remain at Grimmauld, to avoid going back to gaol.

Sirius reluctantly agreed, and hinted that banishing his mother from the house would likely improve the living conditions immensely.

With Dumbledore in the front of the house, working on the riddle of removing Mrs Black's portrait, Snape made his move. Harry was slowly moving about the room, looking for the locket in the cabinets.

"Silencio," Snape hissed, moving forward and pinning Sirius to the wall. Harry watched from the doorway, stunned, as Snape easily held the slightly taller man and immobilized him.

"Now we come to the favour part of the evening," Snape said. Sirius looked annoyed, and darted his eyes toward Harry.

"Easily obliviated," Snape muttered. At that, Sirius struggled more, until Harry saw him stop dead. Harry wondered if Snape had hexed him, before he noticed that Snape was holding not his wand, but a wooden ladle of similar size against Sirius's groin.

"There is an old heirloom in this house that I need for an experiment. You will allow me to visit, search for, and retrieve this item. Once I have retrieved this item, you will be given Peter Pettigrew."

Snape stood back and released the spell just as Sirius let loose a stream of curse words.

"Peter Pettigrew is dead," Sirius sneered. "You get nothing."

Snape calmly withdrew a photograph from his pocket, holding it up for Sirius to see. He had a slightly smug look on his face, and Harry knew instantly that it was his trump card, if not from Snape's expression, but from the way the colour drained out of Sirius' face.

"I assure you he is very much alive."

"I spent ten years in Azkaban, and you knew he was alive!" Sirius growled, catching his second breath. He looked like he was getting ready to hex Snape, and had forgotten that Dumbledore wasn't that far away.

"Not until very recently," Snape countered, and Harry could tell he was starting to lose his cool. Being a student that had caused Snape to lose it enough to launch a jar of cockroaches at his head, Harry knew the signs.

"As you'll likely remember, Cornelius Fudge isn't very receptive to being proved wrong. So I suggest that you play along with the headmaster's plans, be a good dog and stay home. I'm

certain the headmaster will work on proving your innocence when he has some spare time."

Dumbledore chose that moment to return to the room, looking sheepishly at them as he smiled.

"I do believe we shall take our leave, as I fear I have upset Mrs Black further."

"Well done," Sirius muttered, before clasping Harry on the back of the shoulders. "I'm glad you came to visit, and that you gave me a chance to explain. I can't believe how much you look like James."

"But I have my mother's eyes," Harry softly repeated. He felt a piercing hitch inside every time someone said it, only long enough to last a second, because he couldn't remember his mum looking at him. The only time he'd seen them was in the Mirror of Erised and in the Forbidden Forest, but her eyes had been a muted shade of grey.

"Lovely," Snape said, interrupting. "Headmaster, we do have a schedule."

"Kreacher!" Sirius bellowed, eyeing Snape suspiciously as Dumbledore worked to get the Floo connection running. "Make a list off all the heirlooms in this house. The family ones."

"Yes, Master," Kreacher said, his voice dripping venom as he glared at Sirius with a look of utter loathing.

"I want to make sure nothing goes missing," Sirius unnecessarily said, his eyes focused completely on Snape. Within seconds a bright green fire was roaring in the fireplace, and Sirius was giving Harry a hug. To Harry, it felt like he'd finally come home.

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Curfew for first years was at 8 pm, in which they were all expected to be in their dorms. Technically they were to be in bed at 10, but the only Prefect in Gryffindor who tried to enforce that was Percy. Ron had been ignoring Percy for eleven years of his life, though, and happily continued to do so at school. He and Hermione listened raptly to the story of Sirius Black. Ron was immediately inclined to believe everything, but Hermione was still sceptical. She wondered why Sirius couldn't remember what spells he'd fired off at Peter Pettigrew. Harry promised to ask more questions the next time he saw Sirius, and they headed off to bed.

The dorm was rather close quarters, which was nice for cosiness and chatting, but the curtains around their beds were brilliant for when any of them wanted to stay up later. The only problem with it was that there was no lighting options inside the curtains, so Harry cast a *lumos* spell and stuck his wand over his ear, like a pencil.

"When will the daggers be ready?"

It was only quarter of eleven, and Harry hoped that Snape was still awake. The journal remained cold though, so Harry moved on to making a list of things that needed to be done still.

Find diary - see if Dobby will deliver it.

Find ring - where did Dumbledore say the house was?

Get locket from Sirius' house - why wasn't it in the cupboard?

Ask Snape about my scar.

Research time turners.

Harry leaned over to get more ink, from the bottle balanced precariously on the flattest part of his bedcovers. The journal grew warm, and Harry waited for whatever Snape's answer was.

"Daggers will be ready next week. It was not a time turner that brought us here."

"Do you think it was a curse?" Harry wrote, scowling at his bad penmanship.

"One usually remembers when one has been cursed. What destroyed your horcrux the first time?"

"Voldemort cast the killing curse at me," Harry immediately replied. Beyond the curtain he could hear Ron starting to whistle in his sleep.

"That is not an option," came Snape's strongly emphasized response.

"Well, the Philosopher's Stone gives you eternal life, doesn't it? So maybe that'll be enough to wipe out the horcrux, if it needs to be banished out of me."

Harry picked up his bottle of ink and stretched his feet out under the blanket, wincing at the fading cramp in his leg, and at the cold sheets on his feet. He suddenly realised something, and nearly spilled the ink in his haste to write.

"The Stone! Quirrell now knows how to get past Fluffy!"

Harry didn't want to think about what would happen if Quirrell successfully retrieved the Philosopher's Stone. Voldemort would come back early, and they weren't prepared for that. Harry intended to take full advantage of the time travel and destroy the horcruxes before that could happen.

"A very stupid name for a dog as such," Snape wrote in return.

"We need to stop him," Harry insisted, wondering how Snape could be so utterly unconcerned.

"Potter, have you ever wondered why Quirrell waited an entire month after delivering the dragon egg to Hagrid, before attempting to steal the Stone?"

Harry looked at his journal in confusion. No, the first time he'd gone through first year, Norbert had hatched in late April. Harry remembered clearly, because Ron had been sent to the infirmary on the Early May Bank holiday, and Harry had visited to tell him all about it.

"Maybe he was waiting for Dumbledore to leave the school?" Harry suggested, no longer feeling the immediate urge to get up and go protect the Stone.

"The headmaster is not, unlike what most pupils imagine, all-knowing. Quirrell doesn't need him to leave in order to go into the chamber."

"What's stopping him?"

It took Harry a few minutes to realise that he was having an actual conversation on level with Snape, albeit via written word, and that it was going smoothly. It wasn't quite like talking to Ron and Hermione, but Harry did feel that he could now mention ideas and theories to Snape without them immediately being disregarded as stupid.

"Professor Quirrell has asked each staff member about their enchantments guarding the Stone. All have given sufficient information to bypass their charms and traps, except for myself."

Harry grinned to himself and accidentally flicked ink toward the journal as he tapped his knee with his hand. Snape. Of course it was Snape who was stopping Quirrell.

"When did you tell him about yours, the first time?"

"I believe I mentioned in passing that I enjoy a good logic puzzle, the day of his attempt."

Harry was still grinning, and felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. They were in control. Snape controlled when Quirrell went for the Stone.

"That's brilliant," Harry wrote, yawning. "I was thinking though, that I want to go down again. With Ron and Hermione."

"Let three children down into the chamber again after the Dark Lord? What a fantastic idea."

Harry read the message after twisting himself down onto his side, burrowing under the blanket. It was amazing how well Snape could still get his sarcasm across through text.

"We're going. I don't want my friendships to be less strong because we didn't face half the things we did the first time at Hogwarts."

Harry's wand dropped off his ear, and he fumbled in the dark for a second as the light only lit up a small portion of his red woollen blanket. When he finally righted the wand, Snape had written his response.

"We will discuss this later. If you go down, it will not be without supervision."

Scowling with annoyance, Harry loaded his quill and scribbled back.

"You can't stop me. I'm the one who defeated Quirrell last time."

"I am the adult, Harry. I don't care what you did as an eleven year old, nor how many rules you broke to do it."

"I'm an adult too!" Harry wrote back. "I faced Voldemort five times and died once, just in case you've forgotten."

Slamming the book shut, Harry reached beyond the curtain to put his quill and ink on the bedside cabinet. Stupid Snape. Just when he thought that things were going well, and Snape was treating him like a fellow colleague, Snape had to go and be all authoritarian. His glasses joined the quill and ink, and Harry shoved the journal under his pillow. He refused to open it and read any messages until morning, and tried to ignore that the warmth from it was rather comforting.

When he awoke, Harry found that Snape had not written a long diatribe about Harry respecting his elders, nor had he listed the many painful tortures inflicted on the last person to argue so vehemently with him. Instead, all he found in the journal were three underlined words, pressed strongly into the page as if Snape had imagined smacking Harry with the journal for each word.

"I don't break promises."

As Harry was mostly coherent early in the mornings, it took him only a moment to remember that Snape had made a promise to the memory of his mother, to protect him. Harry knew that Snape was a man of his word, as he'd literally given his life to protect Harry and help defeat Voldemort. Muttering to himself as he got ready for breakfast, Harry realised that convincing Snape to let him go after the Stone would be damn near impossible.

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Snape had a free period on Thursdays, which was scheduled to give him time for marking or preparation work. This Thursday Snape took himself to London, apparating to the street in front of Grimmauld Place. He'd committed to memory the description of the locket that Potter had given him, but had not taken the drawing of it. Snape did not put anything past Sirius Black, and that included childish possession summoning spells. He had brought a copy of the rat's photograph, and charmed it to burn Black's fingers if he tried to take it.

After taking his sweet time, Black opened the door and scowled at Snape.

"Time for your little treasure hunt?" Black jeered, and Snape suspected he'd been imbibing a little.

"Quite," Snape replied, entering the house.

Mrs Black was as vulgar and loud as before, becoming further enraged by each hex muttered by her son. Black was headed to the back of the house, where the kitchen was, but Snape well remembered the layout of the dreary old home and cut quickly into the drawing room. The glass-fronted cabinets that Potter had described lined the back wall of the room, cobwebbed and grimy. They were filled with dark and murky-looking tchotchkes that Snape would expect to find in forgotten cabinets at Malfoy Manor.

"I want you to start in the kitchen," Black said, shadowing the doorway, his arms crossed.

Snape continued his search unperturbed, shining light from his wand into the glass cabinets.

"There is nothing of worth in the kitchen," Snape replied.

"Is that what you're after? Money?" Black scoffed. "I can easily find fifty galleons to keep you out of my house."

Snape turned to look at Black, his eyes glittering.

"No need to play lord of the manor on my account," Snape said. "We both know you only inherited this house due to the death of every other member of your immediate family."

Sirius growled, almost as if he'd forgotten he was in human form, and not canine.

"What are you looking for?"

"Something long forgotten," Snape answered. He didn't want Black to know exactly what they were looking for, as Snape was quite certain that Black would try to use the item for blackmail, much like he himself was doing with the photograph of Pettigrew.

"Harry has mentioned that you've actually managed to keep up regular correspondence with him," Snape said, deliberately using Potter's first name. "Enticing stories of illicit student activities and jinxes to use on other students."

Black took the bait immediately, suspicion across his face.

"Harry? You're not his head of house. Why do you call him by his first name?"

Snape closed another cabinet door on shelves of useless dark artefacts.

"*Harry* and I get along quite well," Snape lied, calmly browsing through a bookcase. It wasn't exactly a lie; their working relationship had been downright peaceful since returning to the past.

Black drew his wand, puffing out his chest in a display of masculinity.

"I don't want him to have any sort of interaction with you other than the two potions classes a week that you teach," Black said, in an attempt to sound threatening.

"Surely even you can't be stupid enough to think that the Dark Lord is gone," Snape derisively said, checking the last cabinet in the room.

"You Know Who has nothing to do with this," Black argued. "This is about me not wanting you anywhere near my godson, *Snivellus*."

"The Dark Lord has everything to do with this," Snape snapped. "It's currently a time of peace, and during which I shall be teaching Harry every skill I can to prepare him for when the Dark Lord returns. And I assure you, he will return."

Black had an ugly look on his face, but Snape suspected he'd seen his crazed cousin and other Death Eaters at Azkaban, and recognized that there was a chance Snape was right.

"What could you possibly be able to teach him that I couldn't?" Black evenly said, his wand still at the ready in his hand. "I was in the original Order, before you snaked in."

The last cabinet appeared to be empty of any sort of locket, though it had a varied collection of shrunken heads in it.

"Are you familiar with the powerful and intimate mental intrusion of legilimency?" Snape nonchalantly asked, closing the cabinet. Five minutes later, when he stepped out of the house to apparate back to Hogsmeade, he'd managed to work Sirius Black up to just short of an apoplectic rage.

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Harry hated occlumency, and even though the first lesson had not ended up in him actually practicing it, he was afraid that Snape intended on testing his abilities for the second.

"Are we going to sit in your office, or your flat? It's warmer in your living room," Harry said, rubbing his arms over top his robes. Snape's office was not as cold as the potions classroom, but only just.

"We are here for you to learn occlumency, Mr Potter," Snape said with gravity, and for a second Harry felt panic exploding in his stomach. Was he really being tested? Or had Snape forgotten everything that had happened? Or, Harry thought, bile in his throat, Snape might have managed to return to his normal time, and left Harry behind. Snape must have noticed the look on his face though, as he raised his finger to his lips in the universal signal for quiet.

"And as your performance in the first lesson was abysmal, I require your utmost attention this time."

With a sense of dread, Harry prepared himself for the pain and revulsion of legilimency. It never came, but instead, a knocking sound came from the fireplace as it whooshed green. Albus Dumbledore stuck his head through the fire, and seemed to be surveying the room. His eyes fell upon Harry, and he smiled.

"Ah, Harry, Severus. So sorry to interrupt, but your order of phoenix tears has arrived."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Snape said, leaning against his desk with wand poised. "I shall retrieve it from you tomorrow."

"Of course, whenever is convenient," Dumbledore agreed. Snape then made the excuse of teaching, and Harry watched Dumbledore disappear into the flames. Snape immediately disconnected his Floo, and pointed Harry toward his flat door.

It was warmer just in the hallway, and slightly above the Gryffindor Common Room's temperature once inside Snape's actual flat. Instead of using the couches though, Snape led

Harry to the laboratory. A plain wooden box sat on the main worktable, along with the vial of Basilisk venom.

"I am uncertain to what amount of venom is needed," Snape said, opening the box. Inside were two ordinary looking leather watches, with a slightly scratched watch face as if they'd been in use for a few years. Snape handed him the smaller one, and it felt slightly heavy with a strongly gilded clasp. The watch fit easily around Harry's wrist, and snapped on.

"Press the wind knob, and say horcrux," Snape ordered, testing it with his own watch. The watch face turned into the handle of the dagger, and in a flash of a second the leather band turned to a solid silver blade. Harry's did the same.

"That's *brilliant*," Harry breathed, holding his dagger up. It was only about four inches long, but that would be enough for the mostly inanimate horcruxes.

Snape held his own up to the light, and seemed quite pleased with it. The next thing he did was to open the vial of Basilisk venom, and pour some into a small petri dish. Harry watched with fascination as the daggers were placed in the dish, and seemed to soak up the venom. As neither knew just how much venom was needed, Snape used half of what he'd collected for the daggers. Once it had been soaked in, neither looked as if they had been affected by it.

"There's only one way to test," Harry said, shrugging a little. He was fine with destroying the goblet or the diadem. Neither of those had tried to kill him.

"The diadem," Snape said, decisively. It made sense to Harry, as they'd had that horcrux the longest. Watching Snape carefully remove it from the lead box, Harry remembered what he'd intended on asking Snape earlier.

"Have you been to Grimmauld Place recently?"

"Once," Snape answered, removing any breakable lab-ware from the worktable. "The locket is not in any glass-fronted cabinet you mentioned."

"It should be there, no one's been in the house in ten years, I don't think," Harry mused.

"It would be easier to locate," Snape said, casting a sticking spell on the diadem so it could not leave the table, "if your godfather wasn't so insistent on following my every movement in the house."

Harry was slightly amused at Snape's extreme precaution, but didn't dare laugh.

"I think he does it to irritate you. But he has been acting oddly lately."

Snape held up his dagger, and gave the diadem a determined look. Harry was quite certain that Snape was hiding any sort of anxiousness in his preparations.

"It'll fight back," Harry warned, no trace of mockery or tease in his voice. "Hit it quickly."

As Snape stepped up to the bench, the diadem emitted a low hissing noise in warning. Snape swung his arm up, and poised the dagger over the diadem. The hissing grew slightly steadier,

and the diadem vibrated slightly on Snape's downswing, at least it to Harry it seemed.

Snape's aim was true, and the effects were immediate. The diadem cracked down the centre, and an ugly black shadow, similar to the one they'd seen in the flashbacks touching the horcrux, rose up and out of the diadem. A strong clasp of wind cycloned around the room, even though it was windowless, and the beakers and instruments on the shelves rattled. A black box to Harry's right, which was sitting on one of the work stools, shook ominously. Snape was focused on the diadem, ignoring the glass breaking around them and focusing on the taunting horcrux. The words were slightly garbled, as Harry was trying to cover his ears and face from the shards of glass, but perhaps as partially influenced by the true diadem itself, he heard the horcrux mocking Snape for wanting to be smart enough to make Ravenclaw as a child.

Angered, Snape raised his dagger to strike the diadem again. Harry was about to tell him that the horcrux would die shortly, but he then noticed the black whispering smoke starting to escape from the box on the stool.

"Bollocks," Harry exhaled softly, grasping his watch. The button was pressed, and Harry easily gripped the dagger as he gave the word and it transformed. Completely ignoring Snape and the broken bits of potion laboratory equipment flying about, Harry flicked open the lid on the box. As he expected, the goblet was resting inside and leaking a vile black substance. Without even waiting for the horcrux to gather itself, Harry jammed the dagger as hard as he could against the soft gold goblet. Heirloom be damned, he was going to kill it.

The goblet, having never been touched by Harry, had nothing to use against him. Instead, it let loose an unholy shriek that Harry imagined would be similar to the banshees Seamus was always talking about. Harry held his dagger tight though, and kept it pressed hard against the goblet.

As Harry expected, both horcruxes died off after a minute of havoc. It seemed like much longer though, and when Harry straightened up, his eyes widened at the mess in the laboratory. Snape would have to replace a large number of his loose instruments that had not been in cabinets, and some of the ingredient jars had been cracked. One or two appeared to be leaking. Snape himself stood in the middle of the room, holding his glittering dagger and staring at the tarnished, broken diadem on the table. He had bits of glass stuck in his hair, torn shreds of parchment stuck to his robes, and a large gash across his cheek.

"What the hell were you thinking, keeping both in the same room?" Harry demanded, checking the back of his own hands for injuries. Just a few small cuts and nicks from where he'd covered his neck with the diadem's first burst of wind.

"To decide which would be destroyed first," Snape snapped back. "Neither of us knew they would interact."

Harry opened his mouth to argue back, but abruptly shut it. There was no point arguing, as they'd at least destroyed two out of six. "Fine. Let's clean this up later."

Shaking his head, Snape spun and headed toward the door. He apparently agreed, as the laboratory was left looking like a bomb had gone off in it. Perhaps Snape had trained house

elves to clean up such messes.

Harry followed Snape back into the main living area, stopping off in the kitchen to get some towels and water. Snape was already there, running his hand under the tap. There was a large chunk of glass, which looked to be from a broken stirring stick, jutting out from his wrist.

"Never just pull it out," Snape instructed, noticing Harry's revolted-yet-fascinated look. He was a bit calmer out of the potions lab, as if he'd moved into an automated mode to deal with injuries.

"Why not?" Harry asked. After a minute, the wound was mostly clean. Snape patted it dry with a cloth, and held his hand up for Harry.

"How much is it bleeding?"

Some blood was already appearing around the edges of the glass, but not nearly as much as Harry expected.

"It's plugged?" Harry guessed. He saw Snape's satisfied nod, and felt good for getting the answer right. Harry had never had anything stuck into his skin like that, and even if he had as a child, Aunt Petunia likely would have passed out before teaching Harry how to deal with it.

"One should normally remove embedded objects with the help of another, to cast the healing charm quickly enough," Snape said, concentrating on his hand. He positioned his wand almost perfectly inline with what looked like the trajectory of the glass, and softly commanded the summoning spell. The glass flew out, and before it had a chance to drop, Snape had cast episkey on the wound. More blood had surged forth, but Snape was fast enough that it was stemmed quickly. To Harry, it seemed like Snape was disturbingly practised at it.

"I have yet to successfully heal such a wound without leaving a small scar," Snape continued, washing his hand again and holding it up to the light. There was a small scar at his wrist, smaller than the glass had been, and pale enough to not immediately be noticeable.

"Where did you learn first aid?" Harry asked, avoiding asking if it had been a required skill for associating with Death Eaters.

"All heads of house are required to take mediwizardry training," Snape briskly answered.

"Oh," Harry answered. He gave a quick glance to his own dagger-watch, noting that the horcrux destruction had only taken them twenty minutes in total. It showed no signs of taking in the basilisk venom, and didn't show any marks from the horcrux. He heard Snape tsk, and within seconds his own hands had been healed.

"Well, Mr Potter. I am pleased to see that you are far more skilled at this than occlumency," Snape said, banishing the towels they'd used to clean up.

Harry stared at him, blinking.

...

Harry returned to his dormitory, checking his uniform along the way to ensure there weren't any stray bits of glass or wooden ladle splinters stuck to his sleeves or hood. It was only nine, and Ron and Hermione had waited up for him. After completely making up details about his 'lessons', Harry played a game of chess with Ron before heading up to their dorm room. While Ron was getting ready for bed, Harry got his journal out and saw that Snape had left him a note.

"Black is acting weird because he is locked up in that house and paranoid. Tomorrow you will find essence of dittany at your desk in class - use it on the cuts from today."

Harry didn't have much by the way of scars on his hands, certainly less than he'd received at the Dursleys while working in the back garden. Still, he'd use the dittany in the morning, and perhaps this time around as he grew up, he'd have less war wounds than the last time. Opening the journal, Harry inked his quill and wrote a quick response.

"Thanks. Good night, sir."

Harry closed it, and put the journal under his pillow as normal. It didn't warm up right away, so Snape had likely gone off to do something else, but that was all right. As Harry reached up to put out the light next to his bed, he noticed that his left hand was free of any marks; that there were no words etched into his skin. Settling in with a content sigh, Harry dropped off to sleep quickly.

Chapter 6

Harry grunted as his foot nearly missed the step ahead of him; cursing Hagrid in his mind. The box they were carrying was moving and swaying, and little tufts of teddy bear stuffing were floating out through the air holes. Norbert, or Norberta, as Harry remembered properly, seemed a lot heavier than last time.

"We're almost there," Harry whispered, slowing down so Hermione could keep up. He'd felt angry for the past few days, annoyed that the second of May had come and gone, leaving him and Snape still steadfastly stuck in the past. The anger wasn't helping him tonight, and Harry was even irritated with the chips and cracks in the stone stairs.

"If Hagrid gets another dragon," Hermione whispered back, taking the stairs carefully, "he's on his own."

Harry growled in agreement and they kept going. Charlie's friends were meeting them at the top of the Astronomy Tower, as previously planned. Ron was in the hospital, recovering from the dragon bite that Harry hadn't been able to prevent. He had taken the note back from Ron though, so this time Malfoy wouldn't be able to intercept it and get them into trouble.

Overall, the past two weeks had gone all right. He'd had regular correspondence with Sirius (who for some reason was eager to teach him duelling skills), Hermione was keeping them busy with revisions, and he was finally becoming less skittish and jittery in the peacetime past. He didn't want to stay there forever, but he wasn't feeling the overwhelming pull to go back.

Watching Norberta finally disappear off in the distance behind some clouds, Harry picked up his cloak. He was not making the mistake of leaving it there again.

"Why did you snap at Ron earlier today?" Hermione asked, watching Harry shake his cloak out.

"I didn't snap at him," Harry denied. A chorus of owls, leaving to hunt for the night, screeched as they flew out the owlery. "I warned him that the dragon would bite."

"Well, none of us knew it would bite right then," Hermione argued back. "And beside, I don't think Madame Pomfrey will say anything about it to Dumbledore."

"No, but Ron wouldn't have spent four days in the infirmary, nor us have to take Norberta alone up here if he'd had listened," Harry grumbled. He held out the cloak for Hermione to sneak under, but she stood stool with her arms crossed.

"Norberta?" Hermione asked. "You're not his older brother, Harry. It's not his fault he was bitten, and it's not your job to order him around."

"No, but," Harry said, frustrated. "Never mind, let's go back before we get caught."

"You know, Ron's angry that he hasn't been given his rat back, and you've been in a foul mood since last week. I think we should have started studying for exams earlier," Hermione said, her voice high and irritating like it had been at the very beginning of first year. "We'd all be much happier."

"No, it's not the exams Hermione. There are more important things than exams," Harry huffed out in exasperation.

It was past half twelve, and Harry just wanted to go to his warm bed where he could close the curtains and be by himself. Just as they reached the door to go back downstairs, Harry and Hermione realised that they were not alone at the tower.

"So eager to leave, on such a nice evening?" Snape asked, stepping out from behind one of the many battlement shadows at the top of the tower.

Hermione paused, looking up at Snape with a mixture of surprise and slight irritation.

"We were just checking, for astronomy..." she started. Hermione abruptly shut her mouth with the look Snape gave her.

"Silence," Snape hissed, stepping closer to them. "Potter I expected to find here, but you, Granger, now that is a surprise."

"Detention, sir?" Harry asked, looking directly at Snape. Snape met the eye contact with intensity that caught Harry off guard.

"Ten points for cheek, Potter," Snape softly said, never once looking elsewhere but at Harry. "And twenty-five points each for being out past curfew."

"Fifty?" Hermione said, in a tiny voice. Snape smiled maliciously.

"I highly recommend returning to your dormitories at once, lest you wish the number to be higher."

With the cloak bunched up in his one hand, Harry grabbed Hermione's sleeve with his other and rushed her toward the stairs before they could lose any further points. It wasn't as bad as the first time they'd done this, years ago, but Harry had a sinking feeling that his housemates would still hate him.

"Mr Potter," Snape said, just as they'd taken three steps down. "As I am quite certain this was your idea, you shall be serving two detentions with me, at a later date."

Harry didn't even turn back to acknowledge what Snape had said, and they both ran the rest of the way back to the Gryffindor common room. Neville was just about to sneak out of the portrait, but Harry pushed him back in.

"Don't. Snape's out there," Harry growled. He stormed up the steps to his dorm, too distracted to say goodnight. Hermione remained downstairs to whisper to Neville about what had

happened, and Harry went straight for his bed.

The journal was cold, but Harry figured Snape would be expecting a message tonight.

"What the hell was that for?" Harry angrily wrote, splashes of ink hitting the page. "We're supposed to be working together, not docking points and giving detentions."

The journal remained its regular temperature, and Harry wondered if Snape was still out patrolling the halls. He almost wished Snape wasn't, because more time with the journal meant Harry would just let out all his anger unedited, instead of having someone responding and making him actually think about what he was saying.

He was about to dig out his chess set from the Christmas crackers and pit the figures against one another when the journal flashed with heat. Ready for a fight, Harry settled against the pillow and headboard of his bed, with his quill poised.

"You are lucky I didn't have you expelled for smuggling a dragon around school grounds."

Harry was gobsmacked, and he checked that his squeaked 'what?!' hadn't woken anyone up.

"Expelled! Would you rather the dragon have stayed at Hogwarts?"

Harry swore as his ink bottle tipped over, but he was fast enough to catch it after only a few drops had spilled. The Hogwarts elves wouldn't be happy with him, but Harry would try to leave a note of apology with the laundry in the morning. His wand was on the bed beside him, and Harry angrily slashed it through the air as he cast the muffliato spell.

"I would rather you have told me what you were doing, Potter! This was dangerous enough the first time around."

"Rubbish!" Harry immediately wrote. "You're busy trying to get the locket, and you've told me that you'll work out how to get rid of my scar. I handled the dragon when I actually was eleven, so I saw no reason to tell you about it this time."

"And if you'd gotten injured?" Snape fired back. **"If it was you in the infirmary, and not Mr Weasley?"**

"That's beside the point. You need to trust me with some parts of our tasks."

"I don't need to do anything. You took too many risks the first time, and lived only by your luck. We shall not be so unprepared again, Harry."

"What? You gave me a detention because you care about me?" Harry wrote. He stretched in his bed, wondering how every time he sat leaning up against the headboard, he ended up sliding further and further down.

"I only care so that my life's sacrifice is not made for a useless reason. It appears we will need to continue the search over the summer, and I must know that I can trust you not to do anything stupid."

It suddenly struck Harry that Snape was acting like an overly protective git because he was just that. Snape honestly wanted Harry to survive, and he had resigned to the fact that it was him and Harry who were the ones that needed to destroy the horcruxes. Defeated, Harry paused before answering. Snape meant well, in his own way, and from everything that Harry knew about the man, he was one that Harry wanted watching over him.

"You can trust me," Harry wrote, his handwriting much more legible now that he was calmer. Snape's answer was a few minutes coming, likely because he was trying to figure out if Harry was being honest or sarcastic.

"You still have detention. Good night, Potter."

...

Early on Saturday morning, two hours before the start of his 8 am all-day detention, Harry dressed warmly and headed out onto the castle grounds. It was the middle of May -two weeks after Norberta had been picked up-, and while it was warm enough during the day, the cool Scottish mornings still had a good chill on them. And the forest wasn't warm even at the height of day.

It didn't take Harry long to find the clearing in the forest, and this time he found it completely devoid of life. There weren't any small creatures grazing in the clearing, and Harry couldn't even hear the noises of the centaurs that roamed the woods. There were no signs of the future either, no hints to how he and Snape had managed to come back to this point.

He could hear the chirping of far off birds, and see some small flashes of silver amongst the shrubbery, but nothing else. Harry chose a fallen tree trunk to sit on, disregarding the moisture on the bark and letting himself be surrounded by the scents of the forest. He kept glancing back at the silver, thinking about how unnervingly calm the place seemed to be. After a short moment Harry realised that it was unicorn blood that he was looking at. Instead of leaving though, or seeking out the trail of blood, Harry merely closed his eyes.

"I died here," Harry whispered, remembering that night. May 2nd, 1998. Everything that Harry had lived for in the magical world had worked up to that night; certainly everything that Snape had done or thought about in the last twenty years as well. Two armies, two causes, one final resolution. It had always been Hogwarts - Harry knew that the war would end there.

"I died here," Harry said again. He remembered how cold it had been, remembered how deathly quiet the forest had seemed. Remembered his parents, Sirius, and Remus, there to guide him. He remembered the way the forest floor had felt spongy under his feet.

"Harry?"

Harry sprang to his feet, stumbling slightly on a tree root as he straightened. Dumbledore slowly walked into the clearing itself, watching his own steps more than he was looking at Harry's panicked expression.

"Professor Dumbledore!" Harry said, wondering how long Dumbledore had been there, and what he'd heard.

"I must confess, when the portraits told me a student was in the forest, I had thought it would be a Weasley twin," Dumbledore neutrally said, coming to stand next to Harry. He faced the same way that Harry had been looking, but didn't see the memories that Harry was seeing.

"Sorry, sir," Harry apologised, wrapping his cloak around himself. As a first year, he wasn't to leave the tower until breakfast hours of seven, never mind go into the Forbidden Forest by himself.

"It's peaceful here, wouldn't you say, Harry?" Dumbledore said, peering further into the trees. Harry's vision wandered again to the spot where Voldemort had sent the killing curse from.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head slightly. "No, I don't think so."

Suddenly, Harry really wanted to leave the clearing. He didn't want to risk being sent back to the future, so unprepared. He knew that he couldn't face Voldemort again, couldn't let himself be murdered.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "Well, it is fortunate I found you in any event. Sirius Black will be arriving at Hogwarts later, to take lunch with you."

"Is he?" Harry asked, smiling. "He said I could go live with him for the summer. I won't have to go back to the Dursleys."

Dumbledore had a conflicted look that passed momentarily on his face.

"I'm afraid that you will, Harry. Only for a little while."

"Why?" Harry asked, knowing that Dumbledore would use the 'you're too young to understand' excuse.

"I'm afraid some explanations are best left for later," Dumbledore lightly answered. They both paused as something in the distance crashed through the underbrush of the forest.

"They hate me, sir. They've never wanted me there," Harry said, his voice flat.

"Hatred is a strong word, Harry," Dumbledore tiredly said, breaking out of whatever thoughts he had and turning back toward the path to Hogwarts. "For example, one might say that you and Professor Snape hate each other, but I am optimistic that it is merely antagonistic irritation."

Harry stared up at Dumbledore, his expression one of disbelief.

"No, you can safely say there was hatred there."

"Was?" Dumbledore asked, a small smile on his face. He held his hand out, gesturing toward the trail for Hogwarts, and Harry stepped forward.

"I've learned a lot about him," Harry confused, refusing to meet Dumbledore's eyes. "I don't think he likes teaching me occlumency."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "I'm sure Professor Snape knows that he can trust you not to divulge any information regarding his private memories."

"Never, sir," Harry strongly said. "I would never."

Some nettles were snagging on Dumbledore's beard as they passed some lively shrubbery, but the older wizard didn't stop to pluck them out, nor did he try to avoid them. It made him look as if he'd gotten miniature spindly pygmy puffs caught in his beard.

"I do have some questions though," Harry tried, taking a chance. "And Professor Snape would probably take a hundred points for me asking."

"That is very likely," Dumbledore agreed, holding back a thorny branch. "Severus is a very private man."

Harry followed for a few more minutes, working out the best way to ask his question.

"Do you think Snape hates me because my mother died?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore stopped and thought for a moment, and Harry knew that he would give an honest answer. Perhaps slightly vague, but as honest as Dumbledore usually was.

"Did you ever have a teddy bear that you played with, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, catching Harry off guard.

"No, Dudley tore them apart," Harry honestly answered. "I had a blanket though, one I was wrapped in when my Aunt picked me up as a baby."

Dumbledore gave a small and sad nod at this.

"The blanket made you happy?"

"Of course," Harry answered, nudging a stone loose out of the mossy forest floor with his shoe. "It kept me safe at night, made me feel better when I was sick. You know."

"Yes, yes I do. And how would you feel if that blanket was destroyed?" Dumbledore asked.

"Devastated," Harry replied after a moment. "I kept it in my pillowcase when I was older, so Aunt Petunia couldn't throw it out."

"Similar to your blanket, I believe your mother was Professor Snape's one happy childhood memory," Dumbledore quietly said. The light in the forest got brighter as they walked closer to the castle grounds. "When she died, he lost that link."

They passed a small grass snake, hunting in the morning for whatever insects and crickets were still about. Harry fought to resist speaking to it in Parseltongue.

"He also lost it, sort of, when my dad started dating her. And I look like my dad," Harry said, rather certain that Snape also strongly detested his patronage. To his bemusement, Dumbledore smiled.

"Perhaps, but I believe even Professor Snape had realised that he and your mother were never destined to be more than the greatest of friends."

Before Harry could think of a response to that statement, they'd reached the edge of the forest and walked into the warm sun. The morning dew was starting to burn off the grass, and in the far distance owls were circling the owlery with packages of post.

"Sirius will be here at noon for you," Dumbledore said, taking a deep breath of fresh air. "I've asked Professor Snape to allow you a break from your detention for lunch."

"Brilliant," Harry said, feeling better than he had been since waking up early that morning.

"Yes, well. Run off to your detention, Professor Snape hates when students are late," Dumbledore said.

"Right, of course," Harry agreed, taking off into a jog. He stopped when Dumbledore called to him again.

"Harry! Remember that the forest is forbidden - the next time will cost you quite a few points."

"Yes sir!" Harry called, running off again.

...

Harry knocked on the office door, looking up and down the hallway to see if other students were coming. He didn't much care if anyone saw him there, and knew that not even Malfoy would bother him that much; it was just habit to check for others.

The door swung open on its own, and Harry walked in to find Snape sitting at his desk, writing something down in a book.

"What shall I do, sir? Chop ingredients? Scrub cauldrons?" Harry sarcastically asked. He was prepared for one of Snape's usual boring detentions.

Snape looked up and rolled his eyes.

"As much as I would like for you to suffer through manual labour for your stupidity, I have better suited tasks for your time."

"It wasn't stupid," Harry grumbled. "We needed to get rid of the dragon."

Snape held up his hand though, and let the book fall closed.

"We have discussed this already," Snape warned, standing up.

Harry said nothing else, following Snape back into the man's private apartment. Again Harry was met by warmth in the room, and the blanket he wrapped up in every time was waiting for him on the couch.

"Why is it so much warmer in here than in your classroom?" Harry asked, picking up the blanket.

"I don't live in my classroom," Snape tersely responded from the kitchen. Harry noticed an envelope on the coffee table, with 'Do not touch' written on it.

"What's that?" Harry asked, nodding at it. He figured it would be something for him to see, as it made little sense for Snape to have an envelope in his own house reminding him not to touch it.

"A locket," Snape replied, returning to the living room and settling into his seat. He had a sheaf of notes with him, and curiously, a stack of photographs in his hand with the Malfoys on top.

Snape tipped the envelope and Harry watched raptly as the silver chain fell out first. His smile dropped though, when an ugly silver locket followed; jewelled with a vomit-coloured oddly-shaped stone.

"Not it," Harry said, trying to hide his disappointment.

Snape was watching him carefully, but he didn't seem surprised.

"You are entirely certain that the locket was in a cabinet," Snape repeated.

"Yeah," Harry absentmindedly answered. He reached out and carefully touched the locket, confirming that it wasn't the horcrux.

"I found it, well, I got it from Umbridge," Harry said, sitting back against the couch.

"Delores Umbridge?" Snape asked, surprised.

"The crazy cat lady," Harry nodded. "She was wearing it at the Ministry. She'd bought it off of Mundungus Fletcher, who'd stolen it from Grimmauld Place."

Snape gave him a dubious look, but Harry was on a memory roll.

"Kreacher found Mundungus for us. He said that Dung had stolen it from the cabinet that Kreacher had placed the locket in. He'd put it there because he couldn't get the locket open, and Regulus had asked him to destroy it."

"Is that all?" Snape dryly said.

"Regulus stole it. He and Kreacher left a copy of the horcrux at the cave where Voldemort had first hidden it," Harry smartly said.

"Another house elf to question," Snape muttered, noting it down in his notes.

"I don't think that'll work," Harry said, shaking his head. "Kreacher doesn't like Sirius, or me, or, well, half-bloods and muggleborns in general, and it took us a lot of convincing the first time to get him to give up the information."

"Black can still order him to give up the locket," Snape shrugged, not concerned about the morals or blood purity beliefs of a house elf.

Harry nodded, tucking his feet under the blanket on the couch. His shoes had been dropped by the front hallway's door.

"I think he already has. His letters to me have been really scattered and odd."

Snape didn't look impressed.

"Sirius Black has never been the paragon of organized thought."

"Right, well all know you were the bookworm at school," Harry immediately answered, wincing when he realised that he sounded like an arse. "But he'll been really angry in the morning letter, and then in the afternoon he's nice and friendly. He keeps trying to teach me defence tips, and he has a lot to say about you, actually."

"What has that to do with the locket?"

"It feeds off you when you wear it," Harry explained. "Like the diadem, knowing that you wanted to be smart enough for Ravenclaw - it knew that from when you touched it. The more you're in contact with the horcrux, the more it learns about you and the more foulness it seeps into you."

Snape's hand was flying as he took notes, and Harry immediately got the image in his mind of a fifth year Severus Snape racing to write as much as he could on his OWL parchments.

"We had to rotate the locket when we were camping; it got Ron so worked up that he left for two months. I think he's got it, because Sirius was never really angry with me when I knew him. He hated you, and hated Peter Pettigrew. But he never acted like this."

"Check when he visits today," Snape ordered, putting his notes away into a large folder. "See if he's wearing it."

"Yes sir," Harry sardonically said. "Can I have some tea?"

"Not yet," Snape said, pulling out the photographs. "First we are going to enquire about the diary."

Harry watched, slightly anxious, as Snape stood and threw some Floo powder into the fireplace embers. The fire sparked up and Snape stuck his head in, rendering the recipient of his call blocked. Harry only heard murmurs, and after a minute he watched Snape reach in through the fire to grab something. The call wound down quickly after that, and a small blurry bundle was yanked through the green flames before the call was cut.

"Severus Snape, sir! Dobby remembers you!" Dobby squeaked, righting himself and staring at Snape. He then looked around the room, and caught sight of Harry.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter is a great wizard, Dobby is hearing many stories of Harry Potter!" Before Harry knew it, Dobby was jumping on the couch next to him.

"Harry Potter is leaking," Dobby said, peering at him.

Harry had a large smile on his face, but couldn't stop the tears that had formed in his eyes. Although not yet free, his loyal friend Dobby was all smiles and energy.

"Hi Dobby," Harry said, ignoring Snape's disgusted face.

The house elf smiled wide, and Harry wondered what he was allowed to mention while trying to get the diary.

"Dobby, have you heard anything about next school year?"

"Oh yes," Dobby said, looking eager. "Dobby has heard Draco Malfoy is wanting a broomstick!" Dobby said.

Harry gave a little half laugh, blinking away the wetness in his eyes.

"I'm sure he does. But have you heard of anything bad happening? A plot?"

At this, Dobby looked stricken. He jumped off the couch and clutched the hem of his pillowcase, shaking his head.

"Dobby has heard...but Harry Potter must be kept safe," Dobby muttered.

"Dobby," Harry started, glancing up at Snape as if for permission. Snape nodded slightly, and pinched his fingers together to indicate a very small amount.

"I know that your masters are planning something," Harry finished. Dobby gave him a panicked look, and reached for the coffee table. Well-prepared, Harry flung a couch cushion atop the table and stopped Dobby from doing much damage to his head.

"Dobby, listen to me," Harry tried again. "I know you are a very loyal house elf, and that you will try your hardest to do what's right. I need you to trust me."

Dobby hummed fretfully to himself, but he had his large curious eyes on Harry and was listening.

"We need you to get us the diary from your master's house. The one that belonged to Tom Riddle," Harry exhaled, watching sharply for Dobby's reaction.

"Harry Potter must not touch the diary!" Dobby squeaked, bouncing on the floor. He looked incredibly agitated and nervous, and Harry sprung to his feet.

"I won't, I won't!" Harry insisted, holding his hands out to placate the house elf. Harry felt like he was back at the Dursleys', over the summer of second year again. "Professor Snape will destroy it."

Dobby seemed to at least consider this, and Harry was only slightly insulted that the little house elf didn't think he could handle the diary. From the look on Snape's face, the man was amused.

"I can assure you, *Dobby*," Snape said, "that I have both the means and the strong desire to destroy this diary. Most importantly, the dark magic contained within it."

Dobby looked nervously between them, and gave Harry a hesitant little smile.

"Harry Potter must not touch anything from Lucius Malfoy," Dobby insisted.

"I won't," Harry promised, shaking his head. "You've saved my life before, Dobby. I trust you."

"Dobby has?" the little elf said, raising himself up proudly and eagerly.

"Err, yeah," Harry answered, frantically trying to think of how he'd lie his way out of that one. Behind Dobby, in the easy chair, Snape was giving him a 'you are a dumbarse' look.

But Dobby didn't need any further explanation, and was satisfied to know that he'd somehow helped the great Harry Potter before.

"Dobby knows where is the diary," Dobby confidentially said. "Dobby will give it to Professor Snape."

He nodded in satisfaction, and Harry smiled. Dobby would do everything he could to make sure Harry never touched it.

"Thanks, Dobby. You're a great friend."

Dobby beamed, and eagerly accepted the pile of photographs from Snape. They were old, unimportant, and Snape's excuse for calling the house elf over in the first place.

Watching Dobby disappear, Harry felt a weight lift slowly off his shoulders. Two horcruxes down, one on its way for delivery, the locket in limbo, and they were just left with finding the ring and ridding Harry of his scar. Thankfully Nagini hadn't been created as a horcrux yet.

"So, is there any sort of wizarding telephone directory? That we can look up addresses in?"

Snape gave him a blank look.

"You don't honestly expect horcrux to be listed in the directory, do you?" Snape deadpanned, causing Harry to grin.

"No, but I'm hoping Voldemort's grandparents are."

...

Sirius was waiting in a small office down the hall from the trophy room, with a veritable feast from the kitchens. Rolls, luncheon meats, cheeses, pickles, salad, veggies, fruit, and other treats were laid out on the desk, and there were two cool pitchers of pumpkin juice.

"Harry!" Sirius greeted, giving Harry a big hug. Harry only came up to mid chest in the hug, which felt old.

"Hi," Harry responded. He followed Sirius to the desk, and started loading his plate. Conversation easily slipped into Harry's schoolwork, upcoming exams, and Grimmauld Place. Harry kept sneaking glances at Sirius' neck as his godfather talked, but the man wore heavy clothes and was well covered. Harry wasn't sure if it was to hide the locket, or his prison tattoos.

Harry found out that while at Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore had Sirius researching in the voluminous Black family library, looking at blood magic and the different types of protection spells. Harry hoped that it was so he could live there for the summers, and not have to spend time at the Dursleys first.

"So I've heard Snape's teaching you occlumency?" Sirius jokingly said, sitting back in his chair with his coffee.

"Yeah," Harry lightly answered, pouring himself more juice. "It's easily the hardest thing I've had to learn."

"Not surprising, considering the pillock of a teacher you have," Sirius snorted.

Harry furrowed his brows and looked up.

"It's not an easy subject," Harry defended. "And it's something I need to learn, in case Voldemort comes back."

"Perhaps," Sirius said, putting his cup down. "But I think there are other people you could learn it from. And I don't believe an eleven year old should be concerning himself about You Know Who."

"You just don't like Snape," Harry pointedly said, his voice small as if he were trying to avoid angering Sirius.

"No, I don't. I've never trusted him. Not when we were boys, and not now," Sirius said, his voice trailing off to a mutter. "Blackmailing me with that bloody rat."

"Why? Was he an arse to you at school?" Harry pressed, wanting to know. He ignored the remark about Pettigrew, because Harry was sadly certain that without the blackmail, Sirius wouldn't give anything up to Snape, horcrux or not.

"Well of course," Sirius said. "Snape knew all the dark curses when he got to school, didn't hesitate once in hexing you back something awful."

A house elf popped into the room with fresh tea, and popped out before either of them could thank the elf.

"Hexed back, sure," Harry said. "But did he start things?"

Sirius shrugged as he shifted in his chair. "Can't remember, it was a long time ago. You know what school boys are like."

That was a no, then, Harry thought.

"Yeah, I do remember. I was that boy that people picked on," Harry said. It annoyed him that sitting in the visitor's chair, his feet didn't touch the ground. It made him feel like a little child.

"Oh, come on Harry, it was all in good fun. Besides, I'll bet you had lots of friends at school," Sirius said, smiling. He looked like he wanted to reach across the desk and ruffle Harry's hair.

"Sure," Harry blandly said. "Ron and Hermione, once I got here."

Harry didn't want to talk about the past any more though. He'd always known his father and father's friends were bullies, and he accepted it. There was nothing he could do about the past, and Harry was just glad he'd never been the same way.

"You've been spending too much time with *Snivellus*," Sirius said, his gaze narrowed. "He's been putting tales in your head."

"No, he hasn't," Harry bit back. "I grew up with a family that hated me, and a cousin that told my schoolmates to beat me up. I know what it feels like to be that kid."

"Did you think we beat up on him every day?" Sirius asked, surprised. "He was in Slytherin, we didn't see him that often."

"You took his trousers down after exams, in front of everyone!" Harry blurted. He hadn't meant to bring up that incident, but the child in him hated the fact that the bully in Sirius was simply laughing things off. "How is that fun?"

Sirius stopped smiling, and slowly stirred more sugar into his coffee.

"How did you know about that?"

"Occlumency lessons," Harry shrugged. "I've seen memories of his, and he's seen some of mine."

"It happened," Sirius confirmed, speaking carefully. "And I'm not saying we were right. However, you are my godson, not his kid, and I assure you, Severus Snape does not need your defence."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I still need to work with him," Harry responded.

"Work? You're his student, not his apprentice," Sirius laughed.

"I'm not, no," Harry admitted, smiling. "But there are some tasks he does for Dumbledore, and Snape has mentioned I might need to take lessons over the summer."

Sirius looked dismayed at that, and Harry knew it was the schoolboy in him that was put out at the idea.

"Do you know what he's looking for?"

"Some type of jewellery," Harry nonchalantly shrugged. He was watching though, and noticed that Sirius didn't move, there was no brush of his hand against his neck to ensure a necklace or locket was still there. "I didn't even know men usually wore necklaces."

"Oh it's quite fashionable for some wizards," Sirius lightly said. He moved his own collar aside and showed Harry his bare neck. "I prefer just the tattoos."

"Whoa," Harry said, pretending to be fascinated by the tattoos, and not disappointed that Sirius didn't have the locket.

"But anyway," Sirius said, steering the conversation somewhere non-inflammatory. "However did you end up with a full day's weekend detention?"

"I smuggled a dragon out of Hogwarts," Harry said, reaching out for a biscuit from the tray. Sirius gave him a broad grin, and Harry felt as if he'd made the man proud.

"Thatta boy, Harry. We'll make a marauder out of you yet."

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Harry returned to the dungeons with a full stomach and a curious mind. If Sirius wasn't wearing the locket, where on earth was it? Harry really didn't want to have to deal with Kreacher, as the house elf was rather depressing and irritating to converse with. Snape wasn't in his office, so Harry took the chance and walked through to the hallway behind the hidden door. Snape was standing beside one of his bookcases, a pair of thin and Muggle-modern reading glasses on as he perused through a book.

"Sirius wasn't wearing the locket," Harry announced, dropping his school cloak on the couch. There was a thick black book on the chesterfield, and Harry's blanket had been folded up at his spot.

"Hmmm. A Hogwarts elf has been sent to get the directory. You've mentioned that the Gaunts lived outside a Muggle village?"

"Yes. I remember exactly what it looked like," Harry said, slipping on to the couch. After such a big lunch, and the very early rise from bed, he was feeling quite sleepy.

"Cross reference the Muggle listings for Riddle, with whichever reference of the Gaunts is in that genealogy book," Snape instructed, still looking at his own reading.

"All right," Harry said, stretching out and pulling the blanket over himself. Snape was still lost in his own reading, and the house elf hadn't delivered the phone directory yet.

"Why were you in the Forbidden Forest at six in the morning?" Snape asked, his voice distant. Harry had his eyes closed, and answered slowly.

"I needed a place to think," Harry answered, deciding not to bother taking his glasses off. Snape hadn't said anything yet about him setting up to take a quick kip. "And it doesn't scare me anymore."

Chapter 7

Much like the first time Harry had smuggled a dragon out of Hogwarts, the shunning from other students started to wear off within two weeks. They'd not lost as many points this time around, and exams looming overhead quickly distracted Harry's housemates from their anger. He still kept mostly to himself though, only talking to Ron and Hermione in quiet whispers in the common room.

Harry had been using the journal to regularly communicate with Snape, though his detentions had tapered off. Harry was afraid that Hermione would suspect something out of the ordinary, and he was rather certain that Dumbledore already knew that something wasn't quite normal. Still, there were the occlumency lessons he was to take once a week, and those provided ample opportunity to plan their next moves. And to fight.

The first argument had occurred with the delivery of the diary. Snape had an almost unnatural curiosity for the dark arts, which was very strongly rumoured throughout the school and which Harry suspected was still the driving point behind some of Snape's decisions. When Dobby had delivered Tom Riddle's diary, and Harry had explained in great detail what dangers lay within, Snape had peered at the diary with a determined and studious look. Harry sensed trouble right away, and had warned Snape of what the diary was capable of simply by leeching off the power of a twelve year old girl, never mind a grown and powerful wizard. Snape, irritated, had snapped that Harry would do best to mind his own proper business, and that was where the fight had fully started. Harry hadn't lost any more house points, but he and Snape had not spoken to each other for four days.

After the period of silence, Snape had presented Harry with the destroyed diary at his next occlumency lesson. The man had not said anything, merely glared, leading Harry to believe that he had interacted with the horcrux and been perturbed the evil power behind it.

The second argument had occurred only the day before, when Harry had accused Snape of treating him like a child. They had been discussing their plans for dealing with Quirrell in the lower chambers, and Harry had vehemently argued that things go much the way they had the first time around so that his friends could learn to be brave. Snape had balked, demanding to know when Harry had hit his 'fool head' against something that that idea would seem like a good one.

The argument had progressed until finally Harry had blurted, in frustration, information that in retrospect he could have stated much more nicely. The Riddles had not been listed in the directory that Snape had ordered for Harry, as no one from that family had lived in the house since before 1950, and the Gaunts were not listed either. Harry hadn't expected them to be. He did, however, remember after a nightmare one night that Voldemort's resurrection had taken place at Riddle Manor, and that Snape had returned to Voldemort much later that evening, likely at the same manor.

So when Snape had said, yet again, that Harry wasn't big enough to face Quirrell/Voldemort alone, Harry had snapped back that Snape should know the village they were trying to find,

as he'd returned there to swear his allegiance the night Cedric had been murdered.

For a tense few seconds, Harry was certain that Snape was going to launch another jar of dead insects at his head. He didn't, likely because there weren't any ingredient jars in his living room, but he did threaten to ground Harry for an entire weekend, with promises of disgusting potions to clean up and prepare ingredients for.

With the arrival of exam week, tensions were running high through the castle and Harry himself was feeling pulled in a few directions. He was annoyed that he'd been right about the horcruxes being too difficult to completely destroy before summer. He was irritated with Snape, who seemed to be in an equally bad mood, for the same reason. He was excited about the summer, as it meant he could spend time with Sirius, and he wasn't sleeping through the night, as he kept having nightmares that they wouldn't be able to return to their own time. It had been three and a half months, and neither had a clue as to what had brought them back. On more than one or two sleepless nights, Harry had seriously considered confessing to Dumbledore and asking for his advice.

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In retrospect, the obstacle course was rather ridiculous. Harry hadn't questioned it as an eleven year old, but now as a vastly experienced eighteen year old, he realised just how impractical the whole setup was to safe guard the Philosopher's Stone. Why not just hide it in a canister of ruby red candies on Dumbledore's office shelves? Surely hiding it in the open would be much less suspicious, and much less tedious to get to.

With sweaty palms, Harry entered the final chamber, mentally repeating to himself that he had a wand with him, and unlike when he was eleven, knew a multitude of spells to fight back against Quirrell. As it turned out, it wouldn't be necessary.

Snape was standing down in the pit of the room, off to the side of the mirror. He looked morose, as if he'd been there a while and had been looking at his own reflection. To his left, and closer to the stairs, was the crumpled body of Professor Quirrell.

"What do you see?" Harry asked, walking quietly down the steps.

"Excuse me?" Snape said lowly, turning to look at Harry. "Don't touch him. I have no desire to travel to Albania if the Dark Lord escapes."

"In the mirror. What do you see?" Harry continued, carefully stepping around Quirrell.

"Regrets," Snape answered, glancing back at the mirror.

"I see my family," Harry offered. "Usually."

Snape nodded at that, but didn't say anything further. Harry wondered if Snape actually saw his mother in the mirror. Taking a chance, Harry assumed so and asked something that had been on his mind recently.

"You're doing all this for my mother, right? Do you think she's forgiven you for telling Voldemort about the prophecy?"

Snape jerked his head to look at Harry, and his eyes were dark and focused.

"She died before I could find out," Snape blandly answered.

"I think she would have. You didn't know who it was about, and you tried to save us once you did," Harry reasoned. "What I don't know, is if she's forgiven you for how you treated me at school."

"What, exactly, are you trying to prove, Potter?" Snape asked in his low and dangerous tone.

"Just that it was maybe mum who sent us back, so we could sort things out," Harry shrugged. He had estimated that the first time he'd come after the Stone, he'd spent ten minutes in the chamber with Quirrell. That gave them a few minutes to have a talk without fear of anyone eavesdropping.

"The dead cannot send the living back in time," Snape firmly said, crossing his arms.

"Well," Harry started, trying to carefully suggest that Snape might be wrong. "We both saw Dumbledore on the cusp of dying, just before arriving back here. So maybe they can."

"Of course he would," Snape muttered. "Potter -"

"Harry," Harry interrupted.

"*Harry*, I am quite certain that our time travel will come to and end with the destruction of the last horcrux. At that point, it won't matter who or what sent us back here."

Harry snapped his mouth shut at that, and wrapped his arms around himself. He'd walked to his death once before, but he didn't think he had the guts to do it again.

Snape came to stand beside him, so that they could both get a good look at the Mirror of Erised. His arm brushed against Harry's shoulder, and the slight touch and strong presence brought Harry some reassurance.

"We need the Stone, and as far as I am able to ascertain, he doesn't have it," Snape said, his eyes flicking toward Quirrell.

"No..." Harry trailed off, staring directly at the mirror. Much like the first time, he felt his pocket grow heavy with the weight of the Stone. "It's right here."

Snape stared hard at Harry, and for a second Harry was afraid he was doing legilimency.

"Potter..."

"Dumbledore," Harry shrugged, not wanting to explain any further. He pointed to the floor, where Quirrell appeared to be out cold. "What happened to him?"

"He chose the wrong potion and later ran into the floor," Snape deadpanned.

"The wrong potion?" Harry asked, suddenly worried about his own choice.

"He will lose seven hours of memory," Snape impatiently explained. "How did you get the Stone?"

"I haven't a clue, actually," Harry confessed. "Dumbledore put it in the mirror, and said it would only be available to someone who didn't want to use the Stone for himself."

"Which would be why I was not able to see it," Snape muttered, inspecting the mirror from the back.

"You want to live forever?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Absolutely not. I will use the Stone to hopefully prevent you from dying when I get rid of your scar horcrux," Snape answered.

Harry made a queasy face. "How are you going to do that?"

"You will see," Snape vaguely replied. He sounded as if he was trying to make light of the whole topic, and Harry suspected that he didn't want to know what Snape had planned.

"Now, I believe the headmaster will be returning from London shortly, and your friends are in the antechambers?" Snape asked. He slipped the Stone into his own robe pocket, and steered Harry not toward the hall he'd entered from, but a small hidden door in the wall's crevices.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "They were both brilliant. Thanks for not making the potion puzzle harder."

"We must only change what is absolutely necessary, as difficult as that becomes with time passing," Snape philosophically said.

"Oh, so I shouldn't have written my exams perfectly?" Harry joked, with a half laugh.

Snape gave him a strong look.

"I expect you to have."

Harry felt a sudden flush of embarrassment creep up his face, and he faltered slightly under Snape's serious gaze. The man wasn't joking, and Harry actually felt as if he wanted to do well on his exams, just to prove to Snape that he could do it.

"How did you get down here?" Harry asked, changing the topic.

"It seemed," Snape said as he pushed Harry into a narrow pitch-black hallway, "highly unlikely that the headmaster only had one way to get to his precious mirror, especially if he was expecting you and your friends to go after the Stone. The third floor corridor was used for theatre classes when I was a student, and its passages were well known."

Snape kept his hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him toward a rickety set of wooden stairs. Harry climbed them carefully, and stood on his tiptoes to yank on the door's hatch at the top of the stairs. The door, which was actually the back of a portrait, opened up to Madame Pomfrey's private office. The light was bright, and Harry squinted as he and Snape exited to the main infirmary room. Before he could make his escape though, Snape pushed Harry to a bed and told him to get up.

"What for? I'm fine," Harry insisted, leaning back against the bedframe. He grunted as Snape levitated him and plunked him down atop the bed.

"Fine," Snape sarcastically repeated, tugging at a tear in Harry's jumper, just on his sternum. It was then that Harry realised his trousers were also torn, and that his hands were rather bruised and scraped up.

"Fine enough," Harry amended, crossing his arms.

Snape merely crossed his arms, and after a minute Harry huffed as he presented his palms for Snape to heal.

"Allow me to indulge myself," Snape dryly said, performing some light medical charms, "in my secret role of Harry Potter's Protector."

"Prat," Harry muttered, lifting up his jumper for Snape to heal the small gash along his chest.

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Once Potter and Granger had been sent back to their dormitory, and Weasley delivered to the infirmary for a check up, Snape waited just outside the infirmary doors. He didn't bother returning to the dungeons, as he knew that within moments of leaving Weasley, the headmaster would want a detailed recount of the evening's events. He was correct, though instead of the office that Snape had anticipated, Dumbledore had suggested walking outside and talking.

"It seems that Quirinius has no recollection of the evening's events," Dumbledore said, not bothering with hellos.

"Pity," Snape dryly replied.

"And most interestingly," Dumbledore continued, "I was saved the trouble of deciding on his fate, by an owl I received from Gringotts today. It would seem that someone has tipped the goblins off, and informed them that Quirrell was the one to break into the vaults last summer."

"How very fortunate for the goblins," Snape said, keeping his face very passive.

"Fortunate indeed. I must also thank you, Severus, for keeping such a close watch on Harry," Dumbledore said, walking slightly slower than normal down the path. He was stroking his beard, much like he normally did when pondering over something. Snape, who had no real desire to visit the Forbidden Forest, followed slightly reluctantly.

"It is nothing more than what you asked," Snape replied. It was just past dinnertime, and he could see through the castle that students were busy returning to their dorms.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore mused. "And to think I had first wondered in September if you would keep your promise to protect the boy, after finally meeting him."

Snape scowled at that, but as he was slightly behind Dumbledore, the headmaster didn't notice.

"There was never any question. You and I both know that if the Dark Lord returns, I am in a better position if Harry Potter detests me."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, his voice heavy. "Let us hope that does not happen for a while."

He turned to give Snape a piercing look, which would have been highly unsettling had Snape not become accustomed to it in his nearly forty years.

"I assume that is not the only reason you wished to talk this evening?" Snape asked, walking beside Dumbledore now that they were on more even ground.

"No," Dumbledore answered. "Have you finished whatever little quest you had involving Sirius Black?"

Snape narrowed his eyes and flexed his fingers under his sleeves, the only outward sign to show his surprise.

"Not entirely," Snape answered vaguely. He knew that there was little point denying that something was going on.

"Finish it this weekend," Dumbledore said, in a nice tone disguising the absolute order. "I have no excuse to keep a felon and Voldemort supporter in the castle near the students."

"You're worried about the rat?" Snape asked, partially amused.

"More about Sirius. I fear he is succumbing to cabin fever quite rapidly. Though why in that house more so than ten years in Azkaban, I cannot say."

"What will you do with Pettigrew?" Snape asked, ignoring the comments regarding Black's mental capacity.

"Remand him to the Ministry. I believe Sirius has paid his dues, and so has Harry. Although I will have to explain that Harry must continue to consider the Dursleys as his home, for protection."

Ever since the headmaster had first told Snape of the blood magic used to keep the Potter baby safe, Snape had wondered exactly how the spell had worked. It was a branch of dark magic, and was never made clear how Potter could remain protected while not actually in the company of his aunt. After Potter's fourth year, when the Dark Lord had resurrected himself with Potter's blood, Snape had taken extra measures to monitor the areas around Privet Drive

for Death Eaters. He hadn't thought to watch for dementors until after they had been dispatched.

"I fear that it is Harry who will have to suffer most when all is said and done," Dumbledore continued, turning to walk back to the castle. "I will ask far too much of him, and of you."

Snape followed behind silently, strongly resisting the urge to reply that Dumbledore was bloody well right.

"But for now, after the Quidditch game on Saturday, he will go to Grimmauld's. I would like you to escort him."

"To finish my task? Or to irritate Black?"

"To finish your task, and also to supervise," Dumbledore strongly suggested. "His behaviour has been quite odd most recently."

"Potter has mentioned the same," Snape acknowledged.

"Then in this case it shall work out for the best with you there. Harry can spend time with Sirius, and you can have a day and a half to retrieve whatever it is you're looking for."

"A day and a half, headmaster?" Snape asked, ignoring the indirect question of what he was looking for. "You're allowing Potter to stay overnight?"

"Normally I would never allow a student to leave Hogwarts for an overnight stay during term," Dumbledore conceded. "However, in light of Sirius Black's changing behaviour, I wish to consider this a trial visit before summer holidays arrive. If all goes well, Harry can spend part of the summer with his godfather. If it doesn't, I believe he will be most welcome at the Burrow."

"How touching," Snape muttered. "And what about my Slytherins? The first Saturday evening after final examinations is the busiest night for Heads of House."

"Ah yes," Dumbledore agreed, a small smile on his face. "I believe it is the time of year for me to spend an evening in the dungeons, to ensure that housing in that area is adequate for staff and students."

Snape quirked an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. No doubt the headmaster would have the Slytherins building forts in the corridors of the dungeons.

"And Potter's absence?"

"His friends are aware of Sirius Black's escape and innocence," Dumbledore easily answered. "The rest of his house will simply be informed that he is visiting an old friend of his parents' for the evening."

They walked past the path to Hagrid's hut, stepping over the very stones where Snape had duelled Potter for a very brief few moments the night that the headmaster had died.

"I suppose everything will wrap up nicely then," Snape acknowledged, willing himself to not get lost in the memory of the second worst night in his life. "I assume that rumours will circulate that Potter and friends went into the chamber on the third floor?"

"Naturally," Dumbledore replied, not bothered by it.

"You have no desire to stop it?" Snape asked, pausing at the stone gateway not far off from the main doors of the castle.

"I must have some sort of explanation for Quirrell's sudden departure," Dumbledore reasoned, with a smile. "The students will be told the very same thing I have been," Dumbledore continued, his eyes glinting. "Professor Quirrell was found in the lower chambers, planning another burglary, and was reported to the goblins as the person who broke into Gringotts last summer. The students shall, of course, not be told anything about the Philosopher's Stone."

"Of course," Snape agreed. He'd told the headmaster that when they'd found Quirrell, he hadn't yet been able to retrieve the Stone. It was still in Snape's robe pocket, and Snape hoped that Dumbledore wouldn't try to move it.

"The summer shall be quieter, Severus," Dumbledore optimistically said, waving his hand and opening the door.

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Saturday afternoon's quidditch match was a game Potter had never played before. They were playing against Ravenclaw, and needed to win by one hundred and twenty points in order to claim the House Cup. All of the houses had turned up to watch the match, the Slytherins cheering on Ravenclaw, but as Snape sat up in the Professors' section under a cooling charm, he secretly cheered on Gryffindor. Not for the entire house, but for Potter. Potter, who hadn't been so carefree on a broom since before his fourth year. He'd played quidditch since then, but Snape had always noticed the guarded smiles on the boy's face, as if he were hesitant to have too much fun.

It was somewhat still there, but Potter was laughing as he zoomed through the air. It was quite obvious to Snape that Potter's skills as a flier had infused themselves to second nature, and he easily out flew the Ravenclaw seeker and the bludgers on the pitch. At one point Snape was certain Potter had already spotted the snitch, but not made his move as his team didn't yet have enough points to win the House Cup.

Nonetheless, Snape smirked each time a goal for Ravenclaw was scored. It happened thrice, prolonging the game, but Potter seemed content to be zipping about in the air on his broom. Out of habit, Snape glanced about the rest on the field at regular intervals, making sure that nothing suspicious or dangerous was in view. On his tenth glance, he noticed a large dark shadow down by the referee's box, and it took him a minute to recognize the black dog that was there. *Unable to wait to see the boy*, Snape thought with a sneer. He felt certain that Black had spotted him, as Snape tended to stand out amongst his more colourful colleagues, and made sure to exaggerate his applause when Potter finally caught the snitch and ended the game.

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It was a quarter of three by the time Potter had showered, changed, and presented himself at the gates of Hogwarts for apparition. Black the Dog had disappeared shortly after the game, and Snape figured he'd returned to Grimmauld Place ahead of them to make sure nothing was left out that he didn't want Snape to see. Dumbledore had mentioned that he wasn't quite happy about Snape escorting Potter to the house.

To form, Black had answered the door with a half-snarl, and spent five minutes arguing with Snape over the terms of their agreement. It was bad form, and Black allowed his anger to override any common sense to be polite when Potter was around. Potter played his part well though, feigning ignorance and slipping into the kitchen. Snape managed to shut Black up long enough to inform him that Dumbledore was taking the rat to the Ministry the following Monday, to ensure his freedom.

Once Black had processed that little tidbit of information, he'd still glared suspiciously at Snape, but allowed him to search Grimmauld's for the wanted heirloom.

Snape started his search for the horcrux locket in the cellar of Grimmauld Place. It was dank and untidy, a small collection of three rooms mostly under the kitchen and the dining room. At one point the Black family had used them as a makeshift wine cellar, but now the few remaining bottles were covered in cobwebs and dust.

"Accio locket," Snape muttered, expecting exactly nothing to come toward him. Potter had told him that the horcruxes didn't respond to an accio charm, but it was worth the four seconds to try. Snape took another breath of stagnant, musty air, slowly swung his lantern around, and noted that the dust on the floor was undisturbed. It was highly unlikely the locket was down here, and Snape decided to abandon the search for the rooms that were in use.

Returning upstairs, Snape could hear the faint voices of Potter and Black in the kitchen. Black was telling grand tales of when Potter was a baby; of the adventures and games they played in the house at Godric's Hollow. Snape entered the front study, just as Black proudly told Potter about buying him his first toddler's broomstick.

"Humph," Snape harrumphed, walking around the room to the desk. "Too bad you weren't there to save him from falling off his broomstick at his first game."

There were a multitude of papers and sheaves of parchment on the desk, all blurred and secured with a privacy and compulsion spell. Snape, who'd learned to resist most compulsions in his experience as a spy, was easily able to deconstruct the two flimsy spells Black had used to safeguard his notes. Notes Black had made about his experiences in prison, a record of the events of the day he'd supposedly blown up Peter Pettigrew, and hastily written plans for teaching defensive charms and spells. Snape could tell that Black wanted to teach Potter, but his notes were disorganized, his plans sloppy, and most of the defensive spells weren't useful against Death Eaters. For all his time spent in Azkaban, Black still planned to fight fairly, and teach Potter to fight fairly, against a gang of dark wizards who eschewed any sense of propriety in a wandfight.

"Foolish," Snape muttered. The papers were rather telling and rather disturbing, as Black didn't have any sort of filter as he wrote out what was troubling him. Snape's name came up upon occasion, as someone to be watched in regards to Harry. It was obviously that he'd taken Snape's comments to heart, and was highly suspicious of how much time Snape spent with Harry. There were lists of places to take Harry, activities to do with him, life lessons to teach him, and even one entitled 'how to win Harry back.' There was a rather long parchment full of Snape's own wrongdoings, a large amount of the accusations unfounded, and some even proved in court as untrue. It didn't matter though; Black had gone through more than a decade of Snape's life and assigned blame to him for things that had happened in general and to Black in particular. In the last letter that Snape found, Black had started to write a petition to Dumbledore to prevent Harry completely from interacting with Snape. No lessons, no detentions, no supervisory visits, nothing. The letter turned dark as Black described all sorts of horrific acts that Snape had supposedly committed as a Death Eater, and what he would do given unsupervised time with Potter.

Quite unsettled, Snape was now rather glad that he'd come along with Potter for the visit. Potter was eighteen, and likely capable of defending himself, but Snape had always been in the background to ensure the odds were slightly stacked in Potter's favour. He'd been the one to make things right ever since Potter had been an actual scrawny eleven year old. Snape could feel his anger rising up within him, irritation that Black had penned so many dark marks against him. Dumbledore trusted Snape with Potter's life. He'd trusted a twenty-one year old broken Death Eater to give his life for that of a child. And Snape had kept his promise, had been there for Potter throughout his years at Hogwarts to keep the little bastard safe. He'd been more of a father figure than Black could ever be, both in this life and in their future one.

Snape blinked, charming the papers to blur themselves again. He'd never in his life wanted to be an actual parent, had instead channelled any lingering feelings for that into being a strong Head of House for Slytherin. And yet, he had secretly acted as a guardian to Potter. Not a father, but a guardian, a watcher, a surrogate safe keeper to Lily's child. As much as he'd hated, goaded, teased, grounded the boy, Snape readily admitted to himself that he'd always wanted Potter to be safe. Wanted Potter to survive.

Somehow, the boy had. Through a mixture of luck, a small amount of skill, and some background manipulation, the boy had managed to survive. He'd even proven himself quite useful in their tasks with the horcruxes, and without a doubt he was brave beyond measure. Snape remembered once commenting to Dumbledore, in Potter's fifth year, that the Harry was braver than he had intelligence for. Dumbledore had replied that Harry's intelligence was on par with his bravery; at a level only surpassed by Snape himself. It was rubbish, as Snape didn't think himself as overly brave. He merely did what needed to be done. That being said, Potter had turned out to be a man that Snape could feel a slight bit of pride about.

"Snape!" Potter yelled, his voice lazy and unhurried. "Dinner is up!"

Not bothering to answer, Snape made sure that everything was set to rights in the office. He knew it would irritate Black to not know what had been moved, so was careful that even every quill was returned to where it had been. A meal with the boy and Black would turn out to be interesting to say the least. Snape made a mental plan to inspect the bedrooms after

dinner, and to suggest that Potter ask for a lesson in wizarding customs. Best get Black to teach Potter things that wouldn't endanger his life if he were given incorrect information.

Passing the stairs to the hallway, Snape glanced a curious look upwards. There was nothing sticking out, no wispy dark smoke of the previous horcruxes, but there was a strong feeling that *something* was up there. He ignored it though, in favour of a warm supper. There was plenty of time afterward to find the Dark Lord's little bastion of evil.

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Potter was sitting at the far end of the table, nearest the fireplace, listening aptly to Black's retelling of a monstrous dream he'd had.

"First the slithering, the whisper of a black lethifold chilling over my skin as it floated up over the bed. It covered my face, and I felt it suck all the air out of me, like I'd been placed in a Hoover. Then before I could reach my wand, before I could fight it off, it reared up and turned into a screaming banshee."

Snape filled a bowl from a pot of stew on the kitchen counter, noting from the corner of his eye that Potter didn't look particularly disturbed by the description.

"Is that when you woke up?" Potter asked.

"No," Black answered shortly, eating some of his dinner. "She then turned into your mother, and had a proper yell at me for abandoning you."

Potter scooped a chunk of beef with his spoon, but didn't lift up to eat it.

"You've dreamt about my mum?"

Snape sat at the long table, two seats away from Potter. He said nothing, and though was not actively a part of the conversation, was still listening intently. The stew wasn't much of a distraction either, as it had been made by Kreacher and tasted incredibly bland.

"And your dad," Black shrugged. "I've dreams about the Muggles too, the thirteen that died in the explosion with Pettigrew."

Black gave a small glare in Snape's direction, as if daring Snape to mock him.

"I dream about Voldemort sometimes," Potter lightly said, taking a mouthful of stew. He sat back in surprise as his godfather started choking on the stew he had taken in.

"I don't believe your godfather is accustomed to anyone using the Dark Lord's name," Snape calmly said, over Black's coughing fit.

"I've encountered many who call him the 'Dark Lord' though," Black cuttingly said. "Have you told Dumbledore about the dreams, Harry?"

"Naturally, Black," Snape smoothly lied. "Hence the occlumency lessons, once a week."

"Which only you can give," Black sneered, pointing his dripping spoon at Snape. "Why isn't Dumbledore teaching him?"

"Because I am the better occlumens," Snape bluntly replied.

"Sure you are," Black scoffed. "Come next week, I'll have Dumbledore teaching him instead of you."

"He is," Potter quietly said, between mouthfuls of stew. "He's been mentioned in four books about dark arts and magic of the mind."

"*Of course* he has," Black sarcastically replied. "How many times have his brainwashing skills been mentioned?"

"Sirius," Potter exhaled, pushing his stew bowl away.

"This man was a convicted Death Eater, Harry," Black stated, still staring at Snape. "Have you heard of them?"

"Yes," Potter answered. "And I've seen the Dark Mark on his arm too. But Professor Dumbledore trusts him to teach me, so I'll trust him too."

"Dumbledore has been known to make mistakes," Black immediately answered back. He looked like a petulant teenager, hunched over his chair and glaring angrily over his dinner bowl.

"Yes he has," Snape evenly stated. "Such as not expelling a student who tried to have another killed."

"Enough," Potter called, obviously not wanting to go down that road again. "Sirius, I trust him to teach me. That's it. And since I've started occlumency, I've not had many dreams about Voldemort."

Black was quiet, and still glaring down the table at Snape.

"Unfortunately," Snape started, drawing out the syllables, "your godfather seems to be suffering from a different sort of malady. A malevolent spirit, perhaps, influencing his sleep. Or some sort of...curse."

"It's not a curse," Black bit out. "I haven't left Grimmauld's, have I? Slightly difficult to be on the receiving end of a curse."

"Oh you haven't?" Snape asked, sopping up the stew remains in his bowl with a large chunk of bread. "Not even in your more basic form, to take in a match or two?"

"I saw you there too, Snape. Pretending to cheer Harry on, just to irritate me," Black spit. Potter looked blessedly confused.

"No need to pretend," Snape nonchalantly shrugged. "Youngest seeker in a century, and already leading the Gryffindor team in a complete turn around. I believe Harry also set a

Hogwarts record in the game before today's, catching the snitch in under five minutes."

Now Potter looked happy and confused, and Black sported a sloppy half smile of pride.

"Of course he did," Black stated, "just like his father."

"Yes, yes," Snape said, waving his hand irritably. "And just like his mother, his favourite dessert is treacle, he doesn't like being called on in class, and he licks his lower lip when he tries to concentrate."

As Snape listed the personality traits, Black's smile faded in to a scowl.

"What's wrong, Black? Are you upset that your enemy knows your godson better than you do?" Snape asked, smiling slightly as he drank from his glass of water. "Perhaps if you wrote actual letters to him, and not just rants about me, you'd find out more."

"My correspondence is none of your business," Black growled, pushing back out of his chair and gripping the table tightly.

"No, perhaps not," Snape answered, buttering a small piece of bread. "However, I was sent here this weekend to accompany *Harry*, and supervise your visit. Why would the headmaster do that, Black, if he wasn't concerned about your behaviour? Concerns that I can only assume arose from correspondence, as I recall you are to remain here at Grimmauld Place."

Potter was staring between them, watching the conversation bounce back and forth. He hadn't said anything yet, likely as he didn't want to anger Black, but looked like he was about to tell both of them to grow up.

"Harry, do you feel in danger around me?" Black suddenly demanded. His hair was slightly wild and his eyes bright and piercing, giving him a slightly out of control look. He seemed to catch Potter's hesitation.

"I don't," Potter finally answered, with a tentative smile. "I think you've been cooped up in this house too long."

Well evaded, Snape thought, remaining quiet. He didn't particularly wish to make Potter choose between himself and Black, but he did take a certain amount of pleasure in rattling the man. And in the past few years, he'd not had many sources of amusement.

"Well, you're not wrong," Black said, with a forgiving smile. "Finish your dinner and come up. I've fixed up a room for you."

Snape watched as Black almost completely changed his demeanour, losing his anger in one swoop of a smile. He left his dishes on the table for Kreacher to clean up, and waltzed out of the room. Snape figured he was headed for the office, to better hide his writing.

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"Why do you have to do that?" Harry tiredly asked, standing up and taking his bowl to the sink.

"Merely continuing a conversation Black started," Snape answered lightly, though the look he gave was a warning. Harry ignored it.

"Yeah, but you don't have to get him so angry. Why do you still hate Sirius so much?"

"Because he's still the same arrogant teenage bully that he was at Hogwarts," Snape answered, taking his own dishes up to wash.

"That's not really his fault, Snape. He's been in Azkaban, it's like he's been put on pause for ten years. You've had the chance to grow up, but he hasn't."

"Irrelevant," Snape said, but paused when Harry held his hand up.

"If you saw my father today, if he'd lived, would you hate him too?"

Snape paused with the wash brush over his bowl.

"No. He had changed, before we'd even left school. His ultimate act as a father was to sacrifice himself to save you."

Harry looked at Snape, kept eye contact with the dark eyes.

"You did that too."

"I'm not your father," Snape immediately said.

"No, but you act like a guardian. You have since I've arrived at school."

"I have done as promised," Snape quietly said.

"Yeah," Harry replied, lost in thought. He was staring at the peeling Victorian damask wallpaper covering the wall behind the sink.

"Is the way he's acting similar to how you and your friends were affected by the locket?" Snape asked, splashing his cup into the sink.

"Yes," Harry replied, shaking his thoughts clear. "Definitely the paranoia."

"But you've noted that Black is worse in the mornings."

Snape stepped aside, finding a cloth to wipe his hands on.

"And he hasn't been wearing the locket," Harry agreed.

"Because it's likely under his pillow," Snape said. "Black has placed it in his room somewhere for safekeeping, under the bed, or under the pillow, and it's influencing him as he sleeps."

Harry looked queasy at that.

"No wonder he's having such horrid dreams," Harry mumbled. "I'm going to go up and see the room."

Snape nodded as he finished tidying up the kitchen.

"I will be along shortly, and take the room next to yours."

Harry wiped his hands against his trousers and headed for the door, trying to figure out how they'd get the locket safely out of Sirius' hands. Sirius probably thought it was his brother's, and wouldn't be all that keen to give it up, especially if it was persuading him not to.

Chapter 8

Harry's room, the guest room on the third floor that the twins had once occupied, was directly under Sirius' bedroom. Because of this, Harry had a hard time falling asleep, listening to Sirius moving about in his bedroom before getting into bed. Snape had knocked on his door just after they'd all retired, speaking quietly and warning Harry that he'd wake him at three so they could seek out the horcrux while Sirius was sleeping. Not the most convenient time to carry out a horcrux theft, but Harry had certainly done worse for this particular one.

Harry woke quite suddenly when he heard thumping just past midnight. There were no other noises, but it sounded as if something was rhythmically thumping against the floor above Harry's head. Knowing that the horcrux was likely under Sirius' pillow, Harry started imagining what it was trying to do to Sirius. Was he just having another nightmare? Or did the horcrux realize Harry was in the house to destroy it, and it was strangling Sirius in revenge? After another minute, Harry even imagined that he heard a pained groan.

Deciding it wasn't worth waiting until three, Harry slipped out of bed and grabbed his wand and watch. The hallway was quite dark, and only a tiny beam of light filled the top of the stairs, from the Muggle street lamp outside. Harry turned for the stairs, before stopping at the door to the room next to his. Harry knocked quietly, hoping the wards Snape would have put up would wake the man up. They did, and in a few seconds he was faced with a half awake potions master, hair dishevelled, and a pair of black sleep trousers under his nightshirt.

"Sirius," Harry whispered, his eyes wide open. "I heard noises and I think he's in trouble."

A determined look crossed Snape's face, and he retreated into the room for a second to retrieve his own watch. Holding Harry back, Snape was the first to go up the stairs.

The sound was louder outside Sirius' bedroom door, and the thumping had turned to an alarming creaking noise. A chorus of 'no's could be heard, and a muffled list of names were chanted as Snape raised his hand to test the door.

"James. James. Lily! Reg, Reg! James!"

With just his hands and a small amount of whispered charms, Snape was able to slide the door open against Sirius's half-hearted door locking charm. When they reached the inside, Harry was taken back at what he saw.

A fire had been burning in the grate, but had been reduced to embers in the freezing room. Pictures and posters from Sirius' youth were on the wall, some slashed with a knife, some left as they had been. 'Kill the rat,' had been written under a picture of the four marauders, that not even Sirius could break his own sticking charm on. There were stacks and stacks of the *Daily Prophet* around the room; back issues that Harry figured went to 1981, and above the bed a crudely shaped Order of the Phoenix symbol had been carved into the wooden headboard.

Sirius himself was buried under a mound of blankets, his black hair like spilled ink on the white pillows. There was no sign of the locket, and he was twisted in the covers as if he'd gone to war with his bed.

Taking quick stock of the situation, Harry looked around the room and realised that they'd have an easier time if they tried to take the locket while Sirius was still sleeping. Snape seemed to come to the same conclusion, because he pulled Harry close to whisper to him.

"If he wakes, pretend to be concerned about his nightmare," Snape very lightly said.

"I am concerned!" Harry hissed back. "Are you sure it's there?"

Snape took Harry's hand and placed it on the bed, just missing Sirius' kicking foot. The blankets were ice cold, like the rest of the room, but Harry could also feel a malevolence spreading across the mattress.

"Damned traitor," Sirius grunted, his anger muffled only by the pillow.

"Don't underestimate lunacy," Snape muttered in warning as he approached the other side of the bed. His eyes darted about for a few seconds as he searched for the locket, and then he narrowed in on the upper part of the pillow.

"You can't take me," Sirius said, growling in a low voice that sounded as if he was seconds from transforming into his animagus form.

Snape paused, his fingers poised above Sirius' head. He glanced at Harry, who shook his head. Sirius was still asleep, just talking. Threatening.

"He'll never give me up, *Harry Potter*," Sirius warned again, and Harry waved his hand quickly in the air. Sirius wasn't talking in his sleep, the horcrux was.

Snape had already transfigured his watch into the dagger though, and held it up slightly higher than Sirius' shoulder. He counted down with his free hand, with Harry watching silently. At 'two', Sirius' eyes snapped open and he snarled, causing Harry to jump back in surprise.

"Murderer!" Sirius bellowed, twisting to grab at the dagger Snape was holding. Harry fumbled with his own, holding it in his wand hand and trying to search for the locket. Sirius was struggling with Snape, yelling about Snape trying to kill him.

"Sirius! You were having a nightmare!" Harry shouted, making sure he was out of punching range. After another few seconds Snape stepped back from the bed, the dagger in his hand, blood on his wrist, and his hair in his face. He looked irritated, and was glaring at Sirius. Sirius, who was caught up in the blankets with his wand gripped tightly in his hand.

"Dumbledore was a fool to have trusted you!" Sirius spat, focusing solely on Snape. "Come to murder me in my sleep, just as I suspected. Was Harry next on your list?"

"It's in my best interest that the Chosen One *lives*," Snape sarcastically retorted.

"You won't rest until you've destroyed the last Marauder, is that it?" Sirius sneered, ignoring what Snape had said. "Revenge for the prank I pulled when we were kids?"

"I don't care about revenge," Snape evenly lied, and Harry was impressed that he was able to tell such a massive lie with a straight face. "I want that locket."

Sirius looked triumphant, and smiled nastily as he untwisted the blankets around him.

"It said you would. Your lover's locket, of course you'd try to steal it from me."

"Lover?" Harry squeaked, keeping his voice down.

"I have never had a male lover, certainly not your wet younger brother," Snape snapped, pointing his wand straight between Sirius' eyes. "Give it up. The rat for an heirloom, and I want that locket."

"You'll never get this," Sirius said, holding up the locket. It glinted in the moonlight from the window, and the chain was lightly tangled in Sirius' hair. "A greasy-haired traitor like you; you don't deserve anything with our name on it."

"Oh, but you do?" Snape taunted. "I suppose that's the virtue of being a Black, no matter how hard you try, you can't tarnish the name further."

A flash of red exploded against the back wall as Sirius angrily cast some sort of curse. Harry heard a pop of apparition and Snape suddenly appeared beside him, pulling him away from the bed.

"Don't do anything stupid, Black," Snape warned, trying to tuck Harry behind him. He had his own dark wand trained on Sirius, and even though he was in his nightclothes, looked rather intimidating.

"No regrets," Sirius smugly said, taking aim.

"Get ready," Harry warned, whispering. He was still standing partially behind Snape, but had his foot next to his professor's. "I'm going to open it."

Snape subtly tapped his foot against Harry's, and stepped enough to the side that Harry was fully visible to Sirius.

"James?" Sirius asked in sudden confusion, finally noticing Harry in the room.

"*Open*," Harry hissed, watching intently and hoping that the horcrux would hear him. It clicked open with enough movement that Sirius dropped it in surprise, staring with wide eyes at the dark shadowy smoke escaping from inside the locket.

A putrid smell encompassed the room and Sirius gaped in shock at the spidery shapes emerging through the smoke. Harry quickly realised that the room was a lot smaller than the forest area he and Ron had destroyed the horcrux in, and saw that the disgusting black smoke would likely fill the entire room. He tugged on Snape's housecoat, pulling Snape down to the floor where they watched the macabre shadow show above.

"Sirius Black, the man who wasn't good enough," the horcrux said, its voice higher in pitch than Harry remembered. "Not enough to keep the secret to save his friends, not enough to raise their boy."

Sirius was still somewhere on the bed; Harry had heard him backing up into the headboard to try to escape the locket.

"Only fit to inherit from his family due to no one else surviving," the horcrux continued.

Harry finally recognized the figures taking shape, first his parents, then himself, and then the Black family.

"It doesn't know which of us wants to kill it," Harry whispered, kneeling on the floor. He had his dagger in his hand, but couldn't see where the locket was due to the low hanging spectre.

"I have also seen your mind long ago, Harry Potter," the horcrux said. "The boy who is destined to be an outsider. Undeserving of a real family, guiltily admiring the intelligence of the man who killed your mentor."

"What?" Harry hissed, shaking his head in confusion. Unless the horcrux was recalling those nights camping when Harry had finally come to terms with how well his Prince's textbook had taught him...which it probably was.

"This needs to shut up now," Harry muttered, pulling out his wand. Snape had cast a lumos spell, but it did nothing to disperse the black smoky cloud of shapes.

"Accio chain!" Harry commanded, and was pleasantly surprised to see the chain of the locket struggling toward him. He knew the locket and the horcrux didn't respond to a summoning spell, but took the chance that the chain itself had been overlooked.

Harry heard a pained grunt, and finally the locket was flying toward him, chain first. He swung his dagger in a downward motion, smashing the glass of one half of the locket and nearly stabbing it into the floor. Snape's dagger missed Harry's hand by centimetres as it was stabbed precisely and viciously into the second half of the locket. The terrible shrieking noise emitted from the dying horcrux echoed in the room and made Harry wince, but it lasted only a few seconds and finally the disgusting smoke cleared.

Sirius was still pressed back against the headboard, a stunned expression on his face as he looked at them on the floor. His wand was held lightly in his hand, a lumos spell faltering. Snape was the first to rise, dusting the dirt from his housecoat before leaning over and pulling Harry to his feet.

"Likely catch a disease, sitting on that floor for a length of time," Snape grumbled, giving a disdainful look to the cluttered room.

Harry picked up the now-harmless locket, ensuring that none of the glass pieces came out of the cracked parts. He noticed the chain had a small clump of hairs caught up in the links, likely getting caught when Sirius had thrashed about in the bed waking up.

"Sorry about your hair," Harry said, holding up the chain.

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"Would one of you like to tell me just what the hell that was?" Sirius demanded, flicking his wand at the lamps in the kitchen with enough force that the ensuing bursts of flame almost escaped the candleholders.

"Left over present from Voldemort," Harry said, slipping into one of the kitchen chairs with a yawn. Snape sat near him, inspecting the cut on just above his wrist.

Sirius stared.

"I need whiskey," Sirius said, starting to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. He had a bathrobe on over his nightshirt, but had left it untied and the ends flopped about as he walked. "Kreacher!"

Harry stayed sitting at the table, his arm propping up his head as he stared out the window into the tiny back garden. He was very glad that they'd destroyed the locket, but rather hoping that the conversation could be saved until morning.

Kreacher responded to the bellow with a surly look, his pillowcase uniform haphazardly hanging off his shoulder as if he'd just been woken.

"Yessss, Master Sirius?"

"We need more whiskey," Sirius barked. He glanced at Snape and seemed to come to a decision. "Enough for two."

"One," Snape immediately corrected. "I don't imbibe."

"Of course you don't," Sirius muttered, absentmindedly checking to see how much Floo powder was in the pot on the mantel.

"Why not?" Harry asked, curious. He'd always pictured Snape as a man who drank fine wines, or cognac.

"I don't like to lose control," Snape answered, watching Sirius kick a log into the fireplace and light it. "A pot of tea, Kreacher."

Kreacher was not pleased at having to make tea for everyone in the middle of the night. Harry figured that Kreacher hadn't had much of a life to be happy about recently though, and had come from a long line of house elves where the expectations were for nothing but a cruel life and a final resting place on the gruesome wall of elf heads to look forward to. Still, he watched the small house elf effortlessly fill a large copper kettle and put it on the stove, grumbling as he did it, and remembered what had been most important to Kreacher in his past life.

"Thank you, Kreacher," Harry said, sitting back up. Snape was watching him from across the table, where he was bandaging his wrist. Sirius slammed the cabinet doors of the back

kitchen pantry, a glass of whiskey in his hand and a bottle under his arm.

"Found one," Sirius needlessly said.

Kreacher didn't acknowledge Harry's thanks, but paused at what Harry said next.

"We destroyed it; Master Regulus' locket. It's finally gone."

Sirius stopped dead where he was, and stared between them. Kreacher was looking at Harry with a curious expression, as if he wanted to believe Harry, but years of disappointments had trained him not to.

"I know you went to a cave with Regulus, and I know about the poison. I also know what promise you made him, and it's done. It's destroyed for good," Harry said with finality, pushing the locket onto the table toward Kreacher. There was an uneasy silence in the room, and Harry knew that both Snape and Sirius didn't quite know what he was talking about. He could explain later though, for now he was watching as Kreacher reverently picked up the locket and studied it, running his finger over the cracked glass casing. There were tears in the little elf's eyes, and Harry was extremely glad that he'd not burst into hysterics like the first time that Harry had given him Regulus' locket.

"Thank you, Master Potter," Kreacher finally said, and bowed his head slightly. He disappeared with a pop, and Harry was quite certain that he'd gone to his little boiler room to stash the locket in his dirty blankets.

"He doesn't deserve that," Sirius said, as Harry stood up to make the tea. "That's a Black family heirloom."

"He more than deserves it," Harry answered right back, sloshing water around the teapot to warm it up first. "I know exactly what he went through to get it."

"You didn't even know he existed until a month ago," Sirius scoffed. He took another swig of whiskey and Snape rolled his eyes.

"We know about the locket, the elf knows about the locket, and you don't think anything unusual is occurring," Snape muttered.

"Oh, I'd like to know just what the hell was in that thing," Sirius snapped, pointing his glass at Snape. "And I'm sure Dumbledore would also want to know what sorts of tricks you're up to."

"Tricks?" Snape said, raising his eyebrow. "Carving up pieces of someone's soul is slightly more gruesome and involved than a simple party trick."

"I'm not falling for it," Sirius adamantly said, glaring at Snape. "You knew more hexes and curses than any first year when we got to school; I know you cooked up this...this thing...to make me lose my mind."

"It was a horcrux, Sirius," Harry neutrally said, too tired to listen to another fight. "A container that holds part of a soul, to make sure you can live even if your body is destroyed."

Harry brought the tea to the table, handing Snape a mug with the spoon still in it. Sirius appeared to be having issues processing what Harry had said.

"It's not taught as any form of standard education, so it is unlikely that someone as academically disinclined as your godfather has any knowledge of them," Snape commented.

"Harry, don't leave the spoon in the tea," Sirius automatically said. His pureblood rearing was kicking in.

"Snape likes it that way," Harry shrugged, stirring milk into his own tea. "It's a real horcrux. If I wanted you to lose your mind, we would have left you in Azkaban."

Sirius still looked like he didn't believe them, and Harry wasn't sure if it was the late hour, the experience he'd had, or the whiskey.

"So now that you've destroyed it, You Know Who is dead?" Sirius blandly said.

"No," Snape bluntly replied, as if talking to a simpleton. "He made seven of them."

"Seven? But the only way to divide a soul is by murder..." Sirius said, his face deathly pale. He dropped into his seat and nearly crashed the empty whiskey glass onto the table.

"Well, it is Voldemort," Harry shrugged.

"How do you know this? Dumbledore?" Sirius demanded, his eyes bloodshot and narrowed. Harry thought he'd probably look the same if he'd been woken up from a demonic nightmare to find out that Voldemort had made horcruxes.

"Sort of," Harry answered, looking to Snape for guidance.

Snape put his mug back down on the table, a strand of his hair pulled by the spoon as it went.

"We know this because this isn't the first time we've gone through this little seek and destroy," Snape said, making it sound like he'd been directly involved the last time. Harry supposed that he rather had been, just unknowingly.

"The boy's eleven. When did you do this, when he was still in his nappies?" Sirius questioned, pouring himself more whiskey.

"He's eighteen," Snape said, pointing his finger at Harry. "Which is why we know exactly what we're looking for, and why your little game of hide the locket cost us four weeks of unnecessary delay."

"You've come back in time," Sirius dully said, his hands thumping to the table like deadweight.

"Yes," Snape simply answered.

"Something went wrong, and you were sent back?"

"No," Snape replied, giving Harry a look to not say anything. "It is merely easier to search for these little...gifts, when not involved in a full blown war."

"We're going back to war?" Sirius immediately asked, sitting up straighter. "Right, we'll be prepared this time. I'll give Grimmauld Place to the Order, and we can recruit - I assume Dumbledore will still be in charge of the Order?"

Harry gave Sirius a strange and sad look, as he remembered Sirius' eagerness the last time. His eagerness to help, his eagerness to fight, to prove himself, and how it had lead to his own death.

"Yes, he is," Harry said, shivering slightly. Snape noticed, and with a roll of his eyes, transfigured a pile of linen serviettes on the table into a small housecoat.

"That's why you know each other," Sirius continued, watching them carefully. "The locket said you wanted to take Harry from me."

"Take him and do what, exactly?" Snape snidely asked, finishing his tea. "He's scrawny, arrogant, and absolutely useless with potions."

"Which has absolutely nothing to do with the way the class is taught," Harry grumbled back. If he didn't know any better, he would think that Snape's lips twitched upward in slight amusement.

"He'll be a great wizard one day, just like his father," Sirius snapped.

Snape stood to fill his mug with the tea that was left in the pot.

"He already is," Snape bluntly said. "I'm going to bed."

"Good idea," Harry distractedly said, watching Snape with a bemused expression. It was the first real compliment he could remember Snape ever giving him, something he'd never imagine Snape would say in front of another person.

"We'll talk about this more in the morning," Sirius said, giving Snape a determined look. Snape regarded him blankly.

"Of course."

Harry went up first, wrapping his arms in the warm housecoat and nearly stumbling on the large risers of the stairs. Sirius walked behind him, in a much better - if slightly drunker - mood than he had been since he'd first returned to Grimmauld Place. Snape took up the rear, silent and thinking.

"G'night, Sirius," Harry said, stepping into his room. He heard Snape calling Sirius' name as he turned to close his door. Snape had his arm raised, and Harry was just about to ask what he was doing, when Sirius looked back and Snape cast.

"Obliviate."

Harry blinked dumbly and watched as Sirius let a small drunken smile slip onto his face, and wandered back upstairs.

"What did you do that for?" Harry demanded, clutching the doorknob.

Snape pointed at the bed and followed Harry in.

"We are not telling anyone of the time travel, especially not Sirius Black."

Harry tossed his housecoat toward the dressing chair in the room, not caring that he missed it.

"Why not? He's stuck in the house, maybe he could help us."

"Because instead of planning things out, he acts like an impetuous two year old," Snape grumpily answered. He picked up the housecoat from the floor and instead of transfiguring it back to the serviettes, draped it over the chair.

"He doesn't always," Harry stubbornly argued, climbing back under the blankets of the bed. "And he can help us find the last horcrux."

"Doesn't he?" Snape asked, taking a sip of his tea. "Does a year on the run from Azkaban, breaking into houses in Hogsmeade, slashing portraits at Hogwarts, and dragging a boy with a broken leg through a two mile tunnel seem like the actions of a rational man to you?"

Snape had put his mug down, and had crossed his arms. Harry looked away, playing with a thread on the bed sheets.

"Not particularly. But it's not as dumb as Lucius Malfoy's plan to get the prophecy."

Harry looked up just in time to see Snape's small smile.

"There is that. What did the horcrux mean about your guilty admiration?"

Snape waited patiently as Harry closed his eyes, slipping further down the bed so he was lying on his back. He finally answered, having carefully thought of what to say.

"When we were camping for that year, there were a few times I wished I still had your book. Your potions book. Because as bad as that spell was that I used on Malfoy, I still used that book to save Ron's life, and to brew nearly perfect potions."

Harry was looking up at the constellation pattern painted on the ceiling of the room, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Snape hadn't moved.

"As much as I hated you for killing him and thinking you'd betrayed us, I did realise that you're practically a genius with potions."

Snape didn't apparently know how to take the compliment, as he let his arms drop before nodding slightly. Harry waited for him to say something about the family comment, about the horcrux mocking him for not having one and not deserving one, but Snape didn't.

"We will leave at noon tomorrow, and I will be in the library for most of the morning," Snape finally said, standing straight. "I am certain you and Black can amuse yourselves without me."

"Yep," Harry answered with a sigh, taking his spectacles off to put on the nightstand. "Go back to disliking you?"

"Yes," Snape answered, dousing the candles in the room. "And do not mention any locket, he won't remember it."

"All right," Harry sleepily agreed. "G'night."

Snape paused at the door, casting his own small lumos spell on his wand to see.

"Good night, Harry."

Two minutes later, when Harry rolled over to get more comfortable, he noticed in the moonlight that Snape had forgotten his tea mug on the dresser by the door.

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The last thing Harry had checked on his way to the Leaving Feast was the journal that he communicated with Snape in. The Hogwarts Express wouldn't leave for a few more days, but the big party of the year would be tonight, and Harry was quite looking forward to it. This year Gryffindor had won the last quidditch game, and by his calculations, won the House Cup fair and square.

"Your scar is next."

Harry could picture the written words in his mind - he'd not left a response - and he worried about what Snape's plans were for destroying the horcrux in his scar. Harry knew he was going to use the Philosopher's Stone, and he suspected the Basilisk's venom would be involved as well. Snape refused to tell him what the plan was though, so he'd just have to wait until the day after the feast, when Snape had planned it.

"Harry, I think we've won, you don't need to look so worried," Ron joked, slipping into the seat next to Harry in the Great Hall. Gryffindor banners hung from the rafters, a giant lion banner was behind the staff table, and little ribbons of red and gold were floating in the air. Harry smiled as he looked up at the front table, where Dumbledore was beaming down at the students.

"Another end of year has come, and this year we have a change of decoration in the room," Dumbledore happily said. Harry tuned out the rest of the speech as he watched his classmates all looking eager and hungry as they sat at the tables. Everyone seemed so unguarded, happy, carefree, looking forward to the summer holidays as if their only concern was the distant end of summer and return to school.

He looked toward the Hufflepuff table and saw a small third year Cedric Diggory, obviously not yet having reached his growth spurt. He laughed with his friends, and Harry wondered if Cedric ever had an inkling that he only had three years left to live. The feeling settled sickly into his gut, and Harry hoped that the feast would soon start so he could eat something and sooth his stomach.

He glanced up at the front table, where all the professors save one were watching Dumbledore. Snape was focused on Harry, his eyebrow slightly quirked as he tried to work out why Harry wasn't looking as content as his friends. Harry shook his head though, forcing himself to think instead of what they'd managed to accomplish since coming back. Only two horcruxes were left, his scar and the ring. Sirius had been released from Azkaban, Kreacher's loyalty had been swayed to their side, and he only had to spend two weeks with the Dursleys before he could go to Grimmauld Place.

There. He had plenty of things to look forward to, even if the thought of redoing all his schooling made him feel slightly depressed. Snape had theorized that once the horcruxes were destroyed that they'd be yanked back to their own time, but Harry wasn't as certain. He'd not been in the magical world as long as Snape, but he was very familiar with magic not being particularly fair.

"Three cheers for Gryffindor!" Harry suddenly heard Dumbledore call, and the Great Hall erupted in cheering. Glancing at Snape once again, Harry broke into a smile at the slow, irritated applause Professor Snape was giving.

...

Harry walked along the hallway to Snape's private flat area, kicking off his shoes and stowing them under the cloak rack. He'd slipped out of Gryffindor tower, his excuse of going to see Sirius barely heard over Ron's ranting. Scabbers had been revealed as Peter Pettigrew, and Ron had naturally been quite upset to know that the pet rat he had been caring for the entire year had been the very man to expose Harry's parents to Voldemort. Not quite as upset as Molly Weasley, who'd thrown a veritable fit about the safety hazards and who was on a deadly hunt to find out just exactly where Percy had found his little pet rat. To let Ron blow off some steam, Harry had lent him his broomstick before leaving.

"Snape?" Harry called, walking into the empty living room.

"Laboratory," Snape answered, from down the tiny hallway. Harry walked to the lab, stopping suddenly at the door. There was a blanket up on the worktable, a pillow on the blanket, two very bright lanterns overhead, several vials and stoppered bottles at the head of the worktable, and a large Muggle first aid kit on Snape's desk. A small tray was in the middle of the whole set up, with Snape's dagger watch on it, and a small syringe that was filled with a vile liquid the same colour of the Basilisk's venom. A large plain drinking glass sat beside it, containing a bright blood red potion.

"You're going to cut it off," Harry dumbly said, staring from the doorway. Snape, standing by his back bookcase and wearing only a dark t-shirt and his work trousers, studied Harry's face carefully. He had his reading glasses on, the dark thin frames contrasting with his pale face.

"Yes."

"What if it kills me?" Harry asked, not moving any closer into the room.

"It shouldn't," Snape immediately countered. "Plenty of idiotic children split their foreheads open, with minimal brain damage."

Harry gave him a dubious look.

"Yeah, but they don't get Basilisk venom on the wound," Harry pointedly said.

"It's a risk," Snape admitted. "And our only option."

"Shouldn't we get the ring first? Maybe we need parseltongue to get to it," Harry theorized.

Snape crossed the room and sat on his stool by the worktable, but he didn't beckon Harry any closer. Harry finally noticed the antiseptic smell in the room, and it didn't make him feel the slightest bit better.

"You're never normally nervous to jump into something risky," Snape observed. He plucked a tie from the tray on the worktable and tied his hair back, in a practised move that distracted Harry in its simplicity. When did Snape ever wear his hair back?

"What?" Harry asked. "I was a right mess when I had to face the dragon in fourth year. And going into the lake for that task. And going after the Basilisk."

"And facing the Dark Lord," Snape added. Harry nodded, still standing by the door of the room. He felt incredibly short - even though he'd spent five months again as an eleven year old - here with Snape discussing his potential death, he felt overwhelmed.

"I already died once," Harry said, green eyes staring at the Basilisk venom in the syringe. "I can't do it again."

"We don't always get the choice," Snape rationalized. "Come here, I want to show you something."

Feeling unthreatened by Snape (and certainly quite familiar what fear of the man felt like), Harry approached the worktable and pointedly did not look at the dagger on the tray. Snape had swung one of the work lanterns closer to himself, and in the light, Harry could see the white ribbons of scars on his neck from Nagini's bite.

"This is the culmination of my service with the Dark Lord," Snape said, his low voice rumbling. Snape's thin fingers passed over the bumpy skin, tapping it lightly. "Death at the hands of his snake familiar - a very unpleasant way to go, I assure you."

"But you weren't afraid," Harry insisted, remembering how Snape had looked apprehensive of the pain, but that he'd not fought back or tried to apparate away.

"No," Snape agreed. "For the same reason I suspect you were able to walk into the forest and allow him to kill you. You knew your parents would be waiting for you, and you knew it was

almost over."

"Yeah, but," Harry said, noticing now that Snape had also placed a thin needle and some Muggle medical stitches on the tray. "I have things now that I don't want to give up."

Snape didn't ask for clarification, and Harry was grateful, as he didn't think he could give it. How could he explain that the last time he was willing to leave his friends behind, leave Ginny behind, the Weasleys, Teddy, and all his mates from school, but that this time, he couldn't. It wasn't because his friends had changed, or that he was particularly fond of the age differences between them. No, this time he enjoyed the fact that he and Snape got along, and that Sirius - as full of energy as he was, was still there for him.

Snape picked up the glass of red potion, catching Harry's attention again. It was sparkling in the bright lantern light, and looked like a fizzy drink that Dudley liked to have in the summer.

"First, a sip of potion from the Philosopher's Stone," Snape said, his voice slipping into instructor mode. This wasn't his regular classroom voice though, it was more a private, relaxed, tutoring tone that Snape would use with a specialized student, or a child of his own.

"Then I will apply a salve to numb the area," Snape continued, pointing at the jar. "Cut out with the dagger, flush with venom if needed, and more of the red potion."

The words weren't rushed, just given as if Snape was making a simple calming draught.

"Sew up the wound with an approximation of the same scar, and apply a final healing salve. Estimated project time of thirty five minutes." Snape pointed out the Muggle timer he had set to start on his desk.

"Not that complicated," Harry answered, unsure of what else to say.

"No," Snape agreed. "Ready, Harry?"

"I don't much have a choice," Harry said, shrugging and pretending to not care as much. "The Basilisk venom won't burn into my brain?"

"It might," Snape answered truthfully. He picked up a small eyedropper on his right, which Harry hadn't seen. "It would seem that Fawkes is fond of you, as he gave these quite willingly when I explained what they were needed for."

Harry gave a small smile, and took a deep breath.

"Okay."

Instead of finding a stool, or magically lowering the table, Snape stood and hoisted Harry up onto the table. He stayed standing close, using his thumb to swipe away the fringe on Harry's forehead and study the scar there. It was shaped quite like a lightning bolt, and Harry thought he might actually miss it if Snape completely got rid of it.

"Your spectacles, Mr Potter," Snape finally said, holding his hand out.

Chapter 9

The glasses were folded and placed carefully on Snape's desk. Harry sat in the middle of the worktable, his hands gripping the edges and his feet swinging. The first thing he was handed was the glass of fizzy red potion.

"All of it?"

"Yes," Snape answered. "According to Flamel's notes, it will last for twenty-four hours."

"Let's hope so," Harry said. He took a swig of the potion, and shuddered as the fizzy solution bubbled through him.

Snape motioned for him to lie back, making sure the pillow was directly under Harry's head. He placed several plain white towels beside Harry, and pulled his stool up closely. Harry squirmed under the attention, finding it weird to have Snape leaning over his head.

"I don't think I can stay still," Harry warned, feeling his legs already twitching in nervousness.

"Hmm, perhaps I should have fetched the shackles from Filch's office," Snape said, turning in his seat as he prepared something out of Harry's range of view.

"Filch doesn't have shackles," Harry sputtered, narrowing his eyes as Snape came back into view. Something cold hit his forehead, and he could feel Snape's fingers rubbing the numbing salve over his scar.

"Been to his office a few times?" Snape asked, catching Harry. He'd finished with the salve, and Harry's forehead was numb. The outside of his scalp, around the scar area, felt tingly.

"Once," Harry admitted. Snape clanged something metallic against the tray, and Harry tensed up.

"Smell this," Snape said, putting a small white strip of parchment in front of Harry.

"What is it?" Harry asked, taking it. There were no markings on the parchment, and it smelled of vanilla. He was about to ask again, when he felt a calming rush flow through his body, and his limbs grow much heavier. Apparently it was Snape's version of a sedative.

"I will be asking you question throughout the procedure," Snape informed him, putting a pair of sterile latex gloves on. "To test whether it's gone or not."

"Okay," Harry quietly said. The pockmarks on Snape's lab ceiling were blurry without his glasses, which Harry somewhat regretted having to remove as it would have given him something to focus on instead of thinking about the surgery Snape was doing.

It was very odd, being this close to Severus Snape. For once the man had nothing in his eyes but pure concentration, his eyebrows narrowed as he focused intently on Harry's forehead.

He'd drawn a small dotted line around Harry's scar, but due to the numbing salve, Harry hadn't felt it.

"Do you have any music you could play?" Harry asked, closing his eyes. It was weird to have Snape staring so intently at him and not be doing legilimency.

"I prefer to work in silence," Snape slowly answered. His wrist moved and something light passed the corner of Harry's eye, which he could see through his eyelid.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, fearing that Snape was cutting him and it wasn't going well.

"Concentrating," Snape replied.

"Not what I meant," Harry grumbled. He felt pressure on his head, from Snape steadily holding him to work, but no pain. Snape still didn't speak for a few more minutes, but he did then release a small sigh of breath and sit up straighter. Something was whisked to the tray, and then a towel was quickly dabbed at the sides of Harry's head.

"What happened? Am I all right?" Harry demanded, unable to move his body away despite his panic.

"You're fine," Snape said, grabbing the syringe from the tray. "Flesh wounds always bleed a lot."

Harry opened his eyes widely to stare up at Snape, who was working quickly and moving between three different objects from the tray.

"It's really not very comforting that you know that," Harry said, fighting to stay calm.

"Halfway done," Snape said instead, not addressing Harry's comment.

"How can you do that without feeling sick?" Harry asked, trying to focus on a dark spot on the ceiling.

"When I was fifteen my father accidentally sawed his thumb off. I had to sew it back on."

Harry's mouth went slack in surprise.

"Did you really?"

"No," Snape said, and Harry could hear the smirk. "I used magic."

"Git," Harry muttered. "Why don't you just use magic for this?"

"That will be," Snape said, pursing his lips in concentration as he carefully lifted something away, "an hour of sweeping the floors in my flat, for disrespect."

"Sorry," Harry muttered, sure that he had two warm spots on his cheeks.

"I cannot use magic, as it is a curse scar and magic tends to repair things back to their previous state, something we are trying to avoid."

"Oh. Right."

There was a clanging noise, as Snape banged down tweezers or something similar on the tray.

"You've got the scar off?" Harry asked, mentally imagining what it looked like on his forehead. This turned out to be a bad idea, as he started to feel queasy thinking about a large bloody gash. He wondered what was underneath, if it was a layer of flesh, or just a thin covering over the bone of his skull.

"Yes," Snape answered, changing the angle he was working on and letting Harry see the black venom-filled syringe. An odd smell started to fill the room, one that took Harry a moment to recognize. It smelled like burnt bone, like when the dentist had drilled his tooth the very first time he'd ever had a cavity. The realization of what Snape was doing to him physically hit Harry hard, and his head started to feel light and disorientated.

"I'm really thirsty," Harry said, his voice sounding far away.

"You're also very pale," Snape said, sounding like he was on the other side of the room. That couldn't be true though, because there was his hand and...was that blood on his hand?

"I'm done," Harry whispered, closing his eyes.

...

Harry felt himself being pulled slowly up into a sitting position, his head heavy and slightly aching. There were still no sounds in the room, and it felt much colder than it had when he had first sat down on the table. Snape said nothing, instead hooking his arm under Harry's knees and across his shoulders to hoist him up. Harry's head fell back against Snape's shoulder as he was moved out of the lab and toward the warmer living room.

Snape knew he was slightly awake, but he didn't make Harry walk. Instead he continued into the living room and to the back of the couch, where the little red army cot was still set up. Harry was gently let down onto the cot, which was warm from the fire in the room. A light blanket was placed on top of him, and he grumbled as Snape double-checked the bandage on his forehead. Warm and happy to be off the hard worktable, Harry closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

...

"Harry."

"Mmmhph," Harry mumbled, pulling the blanket closer. It was tugged down from his grip, and Harry scrunched up his face in confusion.

"Harry, open your eyes."

Disorientated over the voice ordering him awake, Harry squinted his eyes open and tried to focus on the black figure in front of him.

"Headache?"

Harry rubbed his eyes with his fingers and it clicked in that it was Snape talking to him, that he'd woken up in Snape's flat. The memory of the scar surgery rushed back to him, and Harry tried to sit up.

"Is it gone?"

Snape, who was sitting again on the stool near Harry's camping cot, leaned forward and carefully peeled back the linen plaster that was on Harry's forehead.

"You still have a scar, but I believe the horcrux is gone."

Without saying anything else, Snape waved his wand in a slow arch over Harry's bed, conjuring an image of a small snake. Harry concentrated strongly on the photo and tried a few words, each time looking to Snape for confirmation.

"No parseltongue," Snape said, banishing the image.

"That's all right," Harry said with a sigh. "How's it look?"

"You'll need a glamour," Snape proclaimed, checking out the scar again. "But so far it looks promising."

"Brilliant," Harry said, struggling to sit up. Snape sat back to give him the room. "Thank you."

"Hmm," Snape hummed agreeably, pleased at his work.

"One left," Harry said, stretching.

"One left," Snape agreed. He stood and walked to the main part of the living room, sitting down in his favourite chair. "Get out of bed, that house elf Dobby brought hot chocolate."

"I'm going to miss Dobby," Harry said, carefully climbing out of the cot.

"Not to worry," Snape said, a little smile on his face. "You have plenty of sweeping to do to remind yourself of him."

....

On the night before the Hogwarts Express left, Harry sat on his bed with his journal, staring through the small window by his bed at the starry open night. His trunk was packed, his wardrobe empty, and Hedwig had been told to show up at breakfast so she could go into her cage. Like all the other boys in his dorm, Harry had carved his name under his bed, with the collection of many past generations. He couldn't sleep though, lost in thought that this could be his very last night ever at Hogwarts.

He and Snape had made the plans to destroy the final horcrux over the summer, but neither of them knew what would happen after. Would they be thrust back to their own time? Would they have to track down Quirrell and kill the Voldemort possession in his mind? Or would things simply continue, Harry as an almost nineteen year old in an almost twelve year old's body? With the last option he could at least grow up with Sirius, but his heart ached for the close friendship he'd had with Ron and Hermione. It already was slightly different, not quite as close, likely due to the age difference and the lack of reason the mature early. No, Harry was well aware that his relationships with Ron and Hermione would never be the same in this world.

Harry closed his journal quietly and placed it into his trunk. Snape was likely asleep, or perhaps of a last prowling through the halls of Hogwarts, savouring his own last night in the castle.

They'd made plans to go to Little Hangleton on Friday, to seek out the final ring horcrux. Snape wanted to destroy it at the decrepit little house, remembering what it had done to Dumbledore, but Harry had tried to convince him otherwise. He was anxious about what would happen afterward, and wanted to prolong the finality of destroying the horcrux.

He also wanted a chance to say goodbye to Sirius first, in the event that it did transport them somewhere, or worse.

Taking his wand, Harry traced it over the bottom on the headboard, just under the line of his pillow. He left four words, four scratchings of the plainest truth in his life, either times of them.

"This was my home."

Shutting his eyes, Harry fought off the night and tried to sleep.

....

Harry sat on one of the hard wooden benches at King's Cross station, his trunk and Hedwig's cage beside him. The Weasleys had already left, after Harry had reassured them four times that he was all right to wait for his relatives himself. Harry couldn't remember if the Dursleys had been late to get him after his first year, but he wasn't overly concerned. It wouldn't be too difficult to get to Little Whinging.

"Come on, boy, I haven't all day," his Uncle's gruff voice sounded, breaking into Harry's thoughts.

"Hullo, Uncle Vernon," Harry dutifully replied, carefully standing up. On the Hogwarts Express he'd placed his wand, journal, and invisibility cloak, into a plastic bag and cello taped it to the inside of his t-shirt. Vernon didn't notice it as he grabbed his trunk and the cage, and Harry knew that he just had to make it back to the house and then he could hide the items in his room.

He also expected that he'd be able to cast *alohamora* without a wand, but he'd made preparations just in case.

"Hmmpf," Vernon grumped, walking ahead of Harry. "Traffic's already horrible, get moving."

When they finally arrived back to Privet Drive, Harry found that his memories had been quite correct. Vernon had immediately confiscated his trunk, locking it up in the cupboard under the stairs, and assuming that all of Harry's magical supplies were in the trunk. He was allowed Hedwig's cage up to his room, and Harry gratefully shut the door as he settled back in.

The room looked very bare, very different from the place he'd left only a year earlier. His old calendar was on the wall, the days until September 1st crossed off in bold red marker, and a badly drawn sketch of Hagrid was pinned underneath. He flopped onto his bed, kicking his shoes to the floor. The plastic bag parcel from under his shirt was yanked out, and Harry unwrapped it to find the journal warm. What could Snape have said? He'd only left Hogwarts early that morning, and as far as he knew, Snape would meet him at the end of the week, and they'd go to find the ring.

"Remember to alter your scar's appearance in the morning. Do not hex the Muggles."

Harry smirked at the message. Snape had successfully cut out the horcrux, but the scar leftover didn't quite look right. It only required a small bit of magic to fix though. The 'don't hex the Muggles' message seemed to be an afterthought, and one that Snape wasn't all that concerned about. He likely just didn't want to have to deal with Dumbledore or the Ministry if Harry did end up jinxing them.

.....

Harry woke up at just past seven the next morning, listening to his Aunt's footsteps in the hallway outside his door. It was almost eerie how he immediately recognized the sound, not having heard it in more than a year. Stretching, Harry pulled himself up out of bed and reached for his glasses. His journal was under his pillow, shoved under there after he'd had a written argument with Snape the night before. They'd argued over how to find Quirrell within Gringotts after the ring was destroyed, but it was more of an amusing argument than an irritating one, at least for Harry.

After pulling on some ratty tracksuit bottoms, Harry concentrated on his scar as he looked into an ornate hand mirror Snape had given him. They'd spent an hour practising how to wandlessly and subtly cover what the scar had turned out. Snape's stitching skills were quite impressive, but he'd not been able to replicate the exact lightning bolt shape that had been there. Harry figured that out of anyone, Aunt Petunia was probably the first person who would recognize how it had changed.

She was down in the kitchen with her coffee, sitting at the table in an old bathrobe and with her hair in curlers. She scowled at Harry when he came in, but didn't tell him to go away.

"I don't want you playing any funny tricks on my Dudley," she warned. Harry got himself a glass of orange juice and sat down at the table with her.

"I won't," Harry said, trying not to shrug. He knew how much shrugging and indifference to her warnings irritated her, and he wanted to keep her in a good mood this morning.

"I wanted to thank you," Harry said.

Petunia gave him a very suspicious look, and stood to pour herself more coffee.

"For what?" she snapped, and Harry could tell she was mentally trying to catalogue anything that she might have done for him.

"For taking me in," Harry answered, watching her carefully. "I know you've never wanted me, but you took me for my protection-"

"You know nothing of that night," she interrupted, a mixture of emotions on her face.

"I know more than you think," Harry quietly said, remembering the crying little boy in his cot, watched over by his mother's grieving friend on the floor. Before she could say anything else, Harry continued.

"I know Dumbledore told you to take me for my protection, and you did. And it worked."

Petunia was back at her seat, dumping copious amounts of sugar into her coffee. No wonder she always seemed high strung.

"What worked?" his Aunt asked, her voice lowered. She seemed to be stewing in her annoyance, that she'd been forced to take Harry. But he was family, by blood, and Harry knew that Petunia had secretly still somewhat cared about her sister.

"I met Voldemort at school this year," Harry bluntly said, watching her face for reaction. "He'd possessed one of the professors, and tried to kill me twice."

She gave him a stony glare, as if trying to ascertain whether what Harry was telling her was real. Harry hadn't ever lied to his Aunt though, and he suspected that she knew that.

"He couldn't do it though. Because of what you gave me."

"Hmmp," Petunia harrumphed, looking out the window into the back garden. The neighbourhood was still mostly asleep, but the birds were out and she watched them landing on the fence.

"Not a very safe school that man is running," she finally said, and Harry could tell that she felt slight validation for taking him in as a baby.

"Well," Harry said, with a small smile. "It's not so easy when the other side knows magic too."

Petunia gave him a piercing look, and drank the rest of her coffee.

"Twice?"

She was curious despite her stubborn pull not to know or care anything about Harry's world. Harry supposed that she did want to know, did want to hear about encounters with the man who'd killed her sister.

"Yeah," Harry said, taking his glasses off to clean them with the bottom of his shirt. "The first time he hexed my broom, and I nearly fell sixty feet to the ground. Professor Snape saved me from that. The second time he tried to strangle me, but when he touched my skin, it burned."

Petunia wasn't listening any more though, she had her face furrowed in concentration and was working over the name on her lips.

"Snape."

"He teaches potions," Harry continued, watching her carefully. She seemed to be mentally grasping to remember the name, and the scowl told Harry that she was quite certain it wasn't a positive association.

"Severus," Harry finally said, when it was clear that his Aunt couldn't recall what exactly it was about the name Snape that she disliked. Severus, however, brought an instant grimace to her features.

"Severus Snape, what a horrible boy," she sneered, gripping her coffee mug tightly. "Arrogant and nasty and lead my sister straight to her death."

Harry stayed silent as she let out her rant, considering to himself that Snape had retained the ability to be downright nasty, and that Petunia was eerily correct on the last bit as well. Snape's arrogance was sometimes warranted though, as the man was an utter genius with potions.

"I suppose you don't want to see him on Friday then, when he comes to pick me up."

"No, I most certainly do not!" she snapped, clanging the cup on the table. "And you tell him he is not to step foot anywhere near this house, or you will be spending the rest of the summer locked in your room."

The swinging door to the kitchen opened and there was a pause as Vernon turned himself on just the right angle to fit through the doorway.

"What's this? You'd best not be bothering your Aunt, boy," Vernon grumbled, looking only half way awake, his hair sticking up in tufts and his house coat ratty.

Harry resisted the urge to say something smart in return. He couldn't much help the sarcasm in his tone though.

"I wasn't. I just told her that my professor is picking me up on Friday to run an errand. Thought you might like a day without me."

"That's a bit odd, isn't it? I'd think they'd have had enough of you too," Vernon proclaimed, wedging himself into his chair. Aunt Petunia rose to make more coffee, and Harry was certain that Dudley was still snoring upstairs - after all, it wasn't yet nine am.

"You'd think," Harry muttered.

"Tell him to meet you at the grocer's on Main," Petunia sharply said, scooping a precarious amount of coffee grounds out of the tin. Despite the large amount of coffee, Aunt Petunia seemed to be brewing more anger than anything to drink.

"I can't," Harry slowly said. "Hedwig's cage is locked."

There was absolutely no way he was going to tell her about the communication journal, and Harry figured Hedwig would probably enjoy the exercise.

"I'm not letting that ruddy bird out," Uncle Vernon warned, shaking the little cafe spoon in his large fingers at Harry.

"Then I suppose Professor Snape will have to come here," Harry shrugged.

"We'll not have one of those freaks showing up here!" Vernon exclaimed, banging his hand on the table. There was a moment of silence as they all looked upward, to see if Dudley had woken. Harry didn't much care if he had.

"You'll write one note, one note, and the bird can deliver it," Vernon said, in a low voice. "That's it."

"All right," Harry agreed, knowing not to push any further.

"And see if this Snape person can take you overnight. We've company on Saturday."

It was added on as almost an afterthought, as Harry had risen from the table.

"He's a teacher, not a babysitter," Harry said, giving his Uncle a stupid look. Fortunately Uncle Vernon was immersed in the newspaper and didn't see it.

"Well, he did save *your* life," Aunt Petunia coldly said, her voice clipped as she took eggs, rashers, and tomatoes out of the fridge. The implied 'but not Lily's' hung heavily in the air. "If he values *yours* so much, why doesn't he just take you for the rest of the summer?"

Uncle Vernon looked up in confusion, sensing something was being left unsaid. "What? What did you do?"

"That was a broomstick accident that he knew the counter curse for," Harry said, his face in disbelief at her misunderstanding. "At the end of the year though, that was your protection that kept me alive. The blood protection."

"But he still managed it as well," Aunt Petunia said, staring straight at Harry. "He wanted to save you, and he did. You don't need the blood protection."

Vernon had turned an ugly colour at the mention of a broomstick, and wasn't taking too well to not leading the conversation.

"That's not how it works," Harry argued back. "Snape had to be there at the right time for the counter curse. With the blood protection, you don't have to be. I'll still be safe."

"Fine," Petunia said. "As my active participation isn't necessary, I expect you to stay out of our way for the summer. Be seen and not heard, and try to avoid even being seen."

Harry stood back and looked between his Aunt and Uncle. Uncle Vernon was smirking, apparently happy his wife had finally spoken up.

"So, you'll just pretend I don't exist?" Harry asked, remembering what the August before first year had been like. "What about meals?"

Petunia gave him a glare, and Harry could see the hatred that she still carried over the death of his mum.

"You know where the kitchen is," Petunia said, crossing her arms. "If not, I'm sure your professor can step in and take you somewhere."

Harry opened his mouth to say something, before snapping it shut. Whatever Snape had done as a child, it was quite certain his Aunt still hated him for it. And now that she knew Snape had saved Harry, and not her sister, she *loathed* him.

Turning without another word, Harry walked out the kitchen and back upstairs. Friday was three days away, and then he'd be out of the Dursleys'. While he hated growing up here, he at least knew that his Aunt and Uncle would make sure he had a roof over his head. He missed a meal or two sometimes for punishment, but he'd grown up knowing that he at least had a home.

Flopping himself down on the bed, Harry wiped away the dampness from the corner of his eyes. In his previous life, Aunt Petunia had never made it so clear that she resented taking him in. He'd suspected, and had certainly felt second rate growing up. But in the past seven years he'd had great friends and the Weasleys, and Sirius, and...and he'd forgotten what it was like to feel unwanted.

Pulling out the journal from under his pillow, Harry blinked his eyes clear and reached for a biro from his desk drawer. The fourth one worked, and he scratched a small note to Snape.

"Friday pickup's okay. Aunt Petunia doesn't want you here, wants me to meet you at the grocer's on Main."

Harry supposed it was rather bland and to the point as a message, but he didn't feel like getting into detail, and he felt rather stupid to be upset. His Aunt and Uncle had always acted this way toward him. He should have expected it, even though Aunt Petunia actually voicing her dislike of him was rather like a cold glass of water to the face.

He wanted to look through the photograph album Hagrid had again given him at the train, but it was in his trunk under the stairs. He'd get it later; he didn't want to deal with the Dursleys right now. Instead, Harry took his glasses off and laid his head down on the bed, dreaming about another life in which he had a family that loved him.

When he woke, he was comfortable and disorientated. It felt like there was a warm hand on his cheek, and Harry could hear the muffled sounds of summer out his window. A lawn mower whirring back and forth, some children's shouts, and a dog barking. Lifting his head up, Harry saw that the warm feeling had been Snape's reply in the journal. Replies, to be precise, as the man had left a quarter of a page's worth in very neat cursive.

"Doesn't want me there, or a wizard there?" Snape had written.

He'd started writing something else, only to scratch it out to complete intelligibility. To his embarrassment Harry noticed that he must have had one or two tears drop as he'd fallen asleep, and they'd not only been absorbed by the paper, but they had been circled by Snape's steady hand.

"Even as a child, your aunt was offensive and spiteful. She was extremely aware of the exact impact of her words. Fortunately, I share the same traits and very much looking forward to conversing with her on Friday. Stay at the house, I will meet you there."

Harry smiled as he read the note, feeling a bit better. Snape hadn't ever been a popular child, and he seemed to understand what Harry was feeling. Or, he really did want to be a dick and visit the house to mock his Aunt, and making Harry feel better was an unexpected happy side effect.

In any event, Harry reminded himself that he didn't have to stay that long. He'd make it to Friday, being ignored by the Dursleys, and then head off with Snape to find the ring horcrux. If everything went as planned, they'd find it on Friday and be able to destroy it. Snape theorized that when they destroyed the ring, they'd go back to their own time. Harry thought it wouldn't happen that easily, and so had made a back up plan to go after Quirrell. After all, Quirrell still housed a part of Voldemort within him.

Three days. He could easily relax at Privet Drive for three days.

...

The doorbell rang at just past eight in the morning, its tinny sound echoing up the stairs. Harry, unsure of when Snape planned to arrive, had packed his few things the night before. His trunk was in the cupboard under the stairs, and Harry hadn't bothered to go after it. Heeding the loud pounding of rain outside his window, Harry threw on a jumper quickly and walked to the top of the stairs. He was just in time to see his Aunt Petunia open the door, and quickly slam it. Harry was pretty sure the dark shadow standing under the front awning was none other than Snape.

"That's rude," Harry said, watching the lock on the door turn open by itself.

"I told you not to bring him here," Petunia hissed, the first full sentence she'd spoken to him since their argument in the kitchen.

"Well, he's here now," Harry pointed out. The door opened, and Aunt Petunia quickly stepped back.

"Get out of my house," she growled, forgetting Harry to focus on Snape. "I'll ring the police."

"Yes, that would be logical," Snape sneered, flicking some water off the top of his cloak.

"Spend the time to telephone the police, wait for their arrival, fill out a complaint, and listen as they merely tell me to leave the property. Or," and here Snape stopped looking bored and fixed Petunia with a knowing glare that he normally gave his students, "stand aside, and the boy and I will be gone in less than three minutes."

Harry bit back a smirk.

"Hullo, Professor," Harry said, still at the top of the stairs.

"Potter," Snape said, his voice clipped like it normally was when he was teaching a class. "Three minutes."

It only took thirty seconds for Harry to return to his room, quickly make his bed, and grab his little rucksack. He'd get his trunk out of the cupboard, and carry Hedwig down carefully. Only thirty seconds or so, but there was already an intense conversation happening at the bottom of the stairs when he returned.

"That is a boy, not a robot," Snape growled, crowding Petunia's space. "Not to be ignored or locked away."

"What do you care?" Petunia hissed, crossing her arms and standing up straight. "You don't have to deal with him every day -"

"You made the same promise to care for him that I did," Snape snapped, shutting her right up.

"Er," Harry said, coming down the stairs. "I need some stuff from my trunk."

Aunt Petunia stalked off into the kitchen, and Snape withdrew his wand. The cupboard door clicked open, and Harry fished out his wand and Marauder's map, just in case they needed it.

"Good bye, Aunt Petunia," Harry called, as they turned to step out into the rain. There was no response.

...

In a much better mood than he had been over the last three days, Harry banged on the door to Grimmauld Place. There was no buzzer, and the doorknocker had hissed at him, so Harry just used his fist. It still took a few minutes to be answered though, and Harry saw that the blast of old rock music from the door opening made Snape's lip curl up in distaste.

"Harry!" Sirius said, opening his arms for a hug. He was wearing huge maroon velvet robes, and an ugly multicoloured shirt underneath. He looked like an actor from a bad 70's film, and Harry bit back a laugh.

"Hi Sirius," Harry replied.

"Come out of the rain," Sirius ordered, giving the sky a dirty look. "There's someone I want you to meet."

Sirius was already back in the house and off to the kitchen by the time Snape and Harry managed to brush the rain off themselves. Snape had cast a waterproof charm over both of them, but water still managed to get all through Harry's hair. Walking back down the hallway, followed silently by Snape, Harry heard familiar voices and laughter in the kitchen.

"Remus," Harry quietly said, pushing open the door.

Harry had wondered how Remus Lupin had spent his days before coming to teach at Hogwarts. He'd apparently spent his time job hopping, working odd and short jobs up and down the country. His clothes were in better shape than they had been when Harry had met him in third year, but he still looked worn and burdened.

"Your father, Remus, and I, we were all quite the group of friends at school," Sirius said, taking Harry by the shoulder to lead him over to Remus. Sirius ignored Snape completely, barely allowing Remus to say hi to Snape before launching into a grand retelling of the Marauder's days. Fortunately, Kreacher remembered quite well the events of two weeks previously, and was quite happy to serve both Harry and Snape a fine tea with snacks, to Sirius' irritation.

"I don't know what's wrong with that bloody house elf," Sirius said, glaring at the back of Kreacher's head.

"I like him," Harry absentmindedly said, chewing on bits of a scone.

Snape had seated himself at the far end of the table, and was lost in a map that he'd unfolded across the scratched tabletop. Snape had used a travelling agent to procure himself a map of northern England, and they'd found Little Hangleton as little more than a red speck on the map. Harry wasn't quite sure how they were going to find the house, but he did remember that it was up atop a hill, hidden behind a stone wall and plethora of shrubbery. Snape had darkly commented that apparition to the town wouldn't be an issue.

Glancing up, Snape caught Harry's eye and gave him a curious look. He then looked to his watch, and cleared his throat.

"We leave at half eleven, Mr Potter," Snape announced. "Best have your little fun time before then."

His unspoken message was clear, at least to Harry. Leave nothing unsaid that he wanted to tell his godfather, as they'd be leaving at 11:30 and it might be the last time he saw either Sirius or Remus again.

Chapter 10

Harry was quiet and pensive as they left Grimmauld Place. He'd spent his time with Sirius wisely, nonchalantly mentioning that he wanted to compare handwriting, just for fun. A few pages of writing were thusly in his pocket, silly notes and sentences scribbled down by Sirius. Harry had asked for his autograph, a simple drawing, and challenged Sirius to write a small paragraph's worth of a short story. All memories he would keep, no matter what would happen today.

When they were packing up their bag to leave Sirius had casually asked what the day's task was. At Snape's sneered 'We're off to meet our potential deaths, Black, with a tight schedule to keep,' Sirius had just laughed it off, leaving Harry to wonder if Snape often told the truth in such a blunt way that people didn't believe him.

Snape had a strong grip on Harry's arm as they apparated, keeping him steady as their feet touched down on the front steps of Riddle Manor. It was still dark and steadily raining, and Harry was grateful for the covered porch.

"Safe enough apparition point," Snape lowly said, looking around at the creepy house.

"Nothing about this house is safe," Harry replied, shaking his head. From what he remembered, the Gaunt shack was on the other end of town. Snape withdrew an umbrella from the bag he'd brought, which Harry guessed had the same space enhancing spells on it that Hermione's had.

"We'll be walking through town," Snape announced, flipping and folding the bag in an impressive feat of magic that left it no larger than a Muggle wallet, which Snape placed in his back trouser pocket. His straight laced frock coat was transfigured into a thin Muggle summer jumper, and his outer robe was transfigured into a second umbrella.

The town wasn't that far away, but the downhill road was a bit slippery with rain and weeds had started to grow over the sides of the lane.

"Can't we just apparate?" Harry muttered, just missing a large puddle.

"We could," Snape replied, closer behind Harry than Harry had thought. "But I require lunch first."

Harry's stomach grumbled slightly at the mention of lunch, and he kept silently walking. It was such a dark day out that he'd not realised it was almost noon.

"Do you think the shack's up there?" Harry finally asked, as they reached the main street of the village. There were several little boutiques, a charity shop, a small grocer's, and a pub. One small bank also had a post office attached to it, but both were currently closed. A few people milled about, giving them a curious glance, before hurrying on their way.

Harry was pointing at a hilly embankment at the end of the street, with a rough rocky cliff and what looked like a thin road carved into it. At the top was a thick thatch of gnarled trees, their individuality indistinguishable from below.

"Likely," Snape agreed, pausing by the pub to look at the chalkboard advertisement. It still had a note about a fair at the beginning of June, and the letters were starting to run from the rain.

"I don't know if I can eat right now," Harry honestly said.

"They'll have bread," Snape replied. "Settles the stomach."

Harry looked up at the wooden sign above the pub's door, The Hanged Man Pub, and followed Snape inside. *Appropriate place for the meal before a horcrux destruction*, he thought.

...

Snape was an intensely curious man and figured the local pub would be the best place to hear the rumours this town carried. The killing curse left very little for the Muggle police to work with, and he wanted to know what the Muggles had concluded as the cause of death for the Riddles. Not because he wanted to correct things, naturally, but because it was amusing to hear the theories.

"We're going to have a little fun, Harry," Snape said, his voice low as they walked into the dimmed room. "Try to play along."

Snape didn't see the need to explain further, though he did notice Harry's confused look as the barmaid approached.

"We've got a window seat or a booth. Window'll be cold on your kid, the rain gets the sill all damp," she said, looking bored with the job.

"Booth is fine," Snape answered, not correcting her.

Once they'd been seated, and the menu perused, Snape took a quick and covert look around the room to note that they were still the centre of attention. Being a Friday, the town didn't have weekenders passing through yet, and they were the only non-townspeople in the room.

"Did you see enough of the Riddle House?" Snape asked loudly, taking a sip of his water. Harry gave him a reserved look, his eyes easily conveying his reluctance to go back to the house.

"Yeah, I..." Harry started, only to be interrupted by an older man at the bar.

"The Riddle House? No one goes there anymore, no one in their right mind."

"Not unless they enjoy ghost stories," Snape calmly replied, his tone unoffended. Hadn't taken long to catch a fish.

"That's no ghost house," the man answered, snorting once into his drink. The laugh wasn't one of amusement though. He looked to be about seventy, and his face was lined with a rough history.

"It isn't?" Harry asked, catching onto the game and trying to sound disappointed. "I thought you said it was, Dad."

He held Snape's gaze, almost daring Snape to say something about the epithet. Snape didn't mind though, allowing a lazy smirk to flash across his face, that the two men at the bar couldn't see.

"There was a murder there," the man asserted, as if that would wow Harry or Snape. His buddy beside him, who looked as if he was moulded into the bar stool, scoffed.

"Three murders, Dick. No trace of a cause, either. Maybe not ghosts, but something evil was there."

They appeared to be continuing an old argument, and Snape smiled to himself as he sipped his water. As a child, an only child, he'd not had much in the way of entertainment and had found ways of manipulating people into giving him information. That had become a game in itself, and had turned into quite a useful skill.

"Ah, to piss with you, Terry," the first man said. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

"Oh, I quite disagree," Snape interrupted, easily jumping into the discussion. "My son quite enjoys ghost stories and hauntings, and we've seen plenty of England's most haunted dwellings."

"Not here you haven't," Terry asserted. The barmaid, a woman in her twenties with a frumpy uniform and a permanent scowl, came out from the kitchen of the bar with two hot dishes of shepherd's pie. Harry's was smaller than Snape's, and she fished a ketchup bottle out of a basket behind the bar for him as well.

"Where'd you hear of Riddle house?" Terry asked, once the barmaid had returned to the bar to clean. He was studying Harry and Snape, no doubt judging them by their plain clothes, southern accents, and Snape's long hair.

"Driving through Greater Hangleton," Snape replied, the steam from the pie enveloping his face as he cut into it. "Someone mentioned in passing about the house."

"Figures," Dick muttered. "Passin' us off as the weirder village down the road."

"We are," the barmaid said, giving them a dark look. "My gran's been passing stories down since that night fifty years ago, and she only retired from here last year. You think it didn't get out that something weird happened here?"

Terry shrugged at that, finishing off his pint. Snape glanced covertly around the bar, noting lots of old and yellowed photographs stuck to the bar walls. Apparently Dorothea, the barmaid, was working at the family's business.

"What did happen then?" Harry asked.

Both Dick and Terry ordered another beer, and Snape got the distinct impression that they'd told this story many times before.

"'bout fifty years ago or so it was, a really cool summer. Colder than normal, but none of us cared much 'cause the second war was on and the town was pretty empty. A few lunches during the weekends, but things were rationed and the town was stringent about blackout curfews. Except this one Saturday, the whole town felt like something was off."

"How can a town feel off?" Dick asked, rolling his eyes. "It was a normal Saturday."

"Don't matter now, do it?" Terry grunted. "We get some passing through here in the summer, so no one took any notice of strangers. They usually stopped by Riddle House, cause in its day it was grand and gorgeous."

"Not like the Riddles themselves," Dick said, swirling the beer in his glass. "Arrogant miserable buggers."

"That's right," Terry agreed. "Their boy Tom went to school with my parents, fancied himself a prince of the town."

"He fell hard though," Dick recalled with a smile, "shamed that who damn family."

"How?" Harry asked. Snape was also curious, having never heard the full story of how the Dark Lord's parents had met. No matter how many times he'd thought on it, he couldn't fathom it.

"Said he was bewitched by the local tramp that lived up the hill there. Taken in, swindled, married, all in a few months. His parents were furious of course, and there was even talk of a baby. But he came running back to Mummy and Daddy, claiming some witch had taken him."

"So maybe it's the tramp's place that's haunted, Dad," Harry said with a knowing smile.

"S'not where the murders were," Dick said, shaking his head. "Things were quiet again for nearly sixteen years after that scandal, though you never saw the Riddles much. They kept locked up in that damn house; even when the war was on Tom didn't go to fight. He would have been about thirty-seven, or thirty-eight."

Dick sounded very bitter at that, and it was then that Snape noticed the cane hooked onto the ledge of the bar beside him. The Riddles had stayed housebound, but Little Hangleton had sent its other sons off to war.

"We reckon the only one to see them was Frank Bryce, their gardener," Terry said, in thought. "I wondered how they got their food, but they had a big garden and I suppose the rest was delivered."

"Doesn't matter," Dick said, cutting him off. "Frank Bryce was the only one to normally see'em, and when that maid that found them dead that Sunday morning, we all knew it had to be him."

"They'd all been killed?" Harry asked, scooping up a bit of mash and gravy with his fork.

"Surely a wartime blackout would be the opportune time for a burglary," Snape mused, his grasping his cup of water. "Perhaps it merely was...interrupted."

"Now see here," Dick said, finishing his beer. "People in those times were good folk, for the most part. None of us really liked 'em, but there wasn't a reason to kill them."

Snape refrained from commenting that psychopaths usually didn't require clear reasoning.

"And that witch's house you say, that's up on the hill?" Snape mildly asked.

"Yeah," Terry hiccupped. "Under the brush by a stone path. If you're not looking carefully, you'll miss it."

"We'll be able to find it," Snape confidently said. He nonchalantly finished his water, and with very little effort, managed to make both Terry and Dick's beer glasses wobble on the table.

"Dad!" Harry hissed, his eyes wide and questioning. Snape said nothing though, finishing off the last bites of his dinner and rattling several of the empty stools at the bar as well. His wand was still in his trouser pocket; as a youngster Snape had learned how to move small things wandlessly. It wasn't very useful, but it was amusing and he'd done it in many pubs with the reputation of being haunted.

"Dick," Terry whispered, grabbing his friend's arm. They watched the chairs continue to move, and jumped as a quick gust of wind blew through the pub, rustling papers and knocking over a stack of paper coasters.

The barmaid came back in to restock some of the liquor, and glared at the two regulars.

"Dick Connelly and Terry Thigslens, you make a mess of my pub again and you'll be cleaning pass closing time."

Before they could answer, she headed down the tiny wooden stairs to the cellar of the pub, likely to fetch more wine.

"Looks like you've got your own ghost problems here," Snape observed, using his napkin to wipe his mouth. "Finished, Harry?"

Harry quickly made sure his face was clean and nodded. Snape fished some Muggle money out of his pocket as he stood, and Harry quickly jumped to his feet. Neither Terry nor Dick had moved from the bar.

"Wait a minute!" Dick called, pointing at the stools. "Did you see? You saw that?"

Snape placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, the tip of his wand now protruding very slightly from his sleeve.

"I see everything, Mr Connelly," Snape answered. A horribly chilly sensation went down his spine and across his hand into Harry, as he cast a strong disillusionment spell on them. They disappeared in seconds, shimmering into nothing.

"Fuck me!" Terry yelped, nearly tipping himself out of his chair. Snape had quickly moved to cover Harry's mouth with his hand, which had caught Harry's snort. They stayed in the corner of the pub watching the two men curse and argue with each other, before the barmaid came back up. She originally looked gutted at the mostly empty pub, before she noticed the money Snape had left on the table. Both the regulars were babbling about ghosts and disappearances, but it was evident she didn't care and didn't want to hear it.

"Shut up with you," her crass warning came out. "And stop drinking before two, you ruddy drunks."

...

The sudden squeeze of apparition had caught Harry off guard, but they landed safely up on the craggy hill above the town. Harry saw nothing but ugly trees and overgrown brush, but there did appear to be some sort of stone walkway that they could follow with a bit of effort.

"You are such an arse," Harry said, looking at Snape's amused expression. "They're going to spend the next ten years trying to convince people they saw a ghost."

"Which is inaccurate," Snape said, carefully walking around the path. "Merely some common household items, with a moving charm on them."

"You're still an arse," Harry said, letting a small laugh escape. It was good to see, as he'd not smiled much since they'd come back in time.

"I believe the house is this way," Snape said, leading them down the pathway.

"Are we going to destroy it here?"

Snape forcefully slashed away an overgrown vine that was creeping out over the wall.

"Remember the headmaster's hand?" Snape warned. "We're not touching it, save for with a dagger."

"Right," Harry mumbled, to himself.

They walked for a few more minutes, unable to find any break or crack in the stone wall that encased the hill.

"Do you think...do you know what brought us back in time?" Harry asked, walking closely behind Snape.

"My theory," Snape said, pausing and listening hard for something, "is that you were the master of death, and somehow brought us here."

"What, with the hallows?" Harry asked, accidentally kicking a stone forward with his foot. It glanced off Snape's boot, and skittered into a shrub that seemed to shudder. "I thought you didn't believe in them."

"I know of a lot of things I don't believe," Snape cryptically said. He held his hand up and stared at the shrub, the lower leaves of which were still moving. After a few seconds the sleek brown and yellow head of an adder emerged.

"Don't bite," Harry said, staring at the snake.

"It doesn't understand you," Snape slowly said. Another smaller adder came out, and Snape drew his wand. "I believe we are close to the shack."

They carefully checked around the bushes, and found a small crevice in the wall a few feet further down. The security ward on it had been almost enough to make Snape simply skim over the chunk of missing wall, but he easily broke the enchantment and found a small opening with a path. Where they were standing they could see down into the village below, and had the spot been cleared away, the view would have been spectacular.

Snape entered the garden first, his wand out and his eyes darting about as he checked for any threats. A rather large grass snake was lounging in a small bit of grass that the trees' branches covered from the rain, and gave him a disinterested look. A small bit of rope was hanging from a hook on the side of the shack - likely what was once used to dry laundry - and a very old wooden chair sat on the porch. It was so weather worn that the colour of the wood couldn't be discerned any more, and holes had been eaten through the back of the seat by insects.

"It's inside somewhere," Harry duly said, almost tripping on a garden path stone. The grass in the front garden had grown rather long, and Snape snidely reminded him to watch his step.

"Can you feel it?" Snape asked, walking with his own head down and focused on the path.

"No, I just remember from Dumbledore's lessons."

Snape nodded and pushed open the door, wrinkling his nose at the smell of fifty years of stale air. The inside of the little house was absolutely disgusting, both in sight and in scent. There were layers of newspaper upon the floor, as if it had been used for insulation, cracked and dusty dishes on the counter, and turned over kitchen chairs by the stove. A rotted out blanket sat on the musty couch, and several glass bottles of alcohol littered the living room floor. Snape could see that there were bedrooms in the loft above, but he hoped he wouldn't need to go near them.

"Could you imagine growing up here?" Harry asked. Snape looked around the filth and scowled. He remembered the little he'd been able to find about the Gaunt family - a father, a brother, and a frail younger sister who would eventually give birth to the wizarding world's biggest monster in centuries.

"It's even worse than the Dursleys," Harry continued, with a shake of his head.

"Who you no longer need to return to," Snape said, looking about the room to see if the ring was anywhere visible.

"No," Harry said, also searching, but in thought. Snape was wary of Harry Potter in thought, as his train of thought did not always take the standard logical steps, or if it did, he didn't often explain how he'd connected the conversation points. "Would you have been my father? If you hadn't called my mum a mudblood?"

Snape stopped searching and stared at him, processing the question, and still unable to figure out how they'd arrived to that topic.

"What?"

"You wouldn't have lost my mum's friendship. So would you have eventually been my father?" Harry said, reasoning it out.

"No, likely not," Snape answered. He used his wand to move a large bundle of papers, but found nothing useful underneath. "Why?"

"Because you're good at it," Harry answered quietly.

Snape had no answer for that, but felt a small measure of satisfaction inside.

...

Harry was hesitant to move a lot of the piles of rubbish on the floor, as he quite remembered that not only Voldemort had put protective enchantments on the ring, but that the Gaunts had been vindictive and nasty, and had likely done the same with their meagre possessions. Although from the amount of liquor bottles and stains on the floor, it was also possible that Morfin Gaunt hadn't cared enough to.

"Where do you live for the summer?" Harry asked, opening some of the kitchen cabinet doors. A rather large family of spiders had taken up residence in one, and Harry shut the door quickly.

"In my home," Snape answered, his expression puzzled as if he were trying to work out where Harry was taking the conversation.

"Well I figured that," Harry said, with a roll of his eyes. "But when this is over, and if we're still stuck here, can I come visit?"

Snape looked at him as if he were absolutely daft.

"You'll be living with your godfather," Snape answered, leaving the 'why would you ever want to visit me' unsaid.

"Yeah," Harry easily agreed. "But I've had, well not quite fun doing this, but I'd...I'd want to come for tea. Or hot chocolate."

Harry was glad he'd turned to face the couch, because he knew he sounded like an idiot and didn't want Snape staring at him.

"You want to come for tea," Snape repeated. He took a moment to think, and then continued in a more knowing tone. "You've never asked me about your mother, is that your motive?"

Harry bristled, turning to look at Snape.

"I don't have a motive," he asserted, annoyed. "I've learned a lot from you, and it's probably because of the time travel and everything you've done for me, but I feel closer to you than Sirius. And I even had fun earlier today, pretending to be your kid and teasing the Muggles, even though I'm pretty sure that's against our laws. So no, I don't have a motive. I just happen to not hate you anymore."

Harry, in a huff of irritation, looked for a spot to angrily sit down on. Seeing that the chairs were overturned and the couch looked like it held several forms of mould, he resorted to kicking a pile of rags on the floor. A mouse squeaked with the upheaval, and darted off toward the fireplace.

Snape, who was watching him with interest from a spot by a ghastly painting of Salazar Slytherin, crossed his arms in a small measure of self-defence.

"I suppose you may come for tea then," he said, quietly as if he thought Harry would rescind his request. "I find your presence quite tolerable now."

Harry looked up and couldn't help snorting.

"Tolerable? Well, that's better than the Dursleys."

Snape grumbled at that and moved to check a bundle of rags on the fireplace mantel.

"If you ever compare me to them again, you'll spend the entire summer doing chores for me."

He flicked his wand to move the rags, but they glowed a strong green colour and refused to budge.

"Found it," Snape said, certain. There were very strong enchantments surrounding the mantel, and the small smile he noticed on Harry's face slipped off into seriousness.

"Remember not to put it on," Harry needlessly said. "Even though it is the resurrection stone."

"Shut up," Snape said, concentrating on disassembling the protective charms. There was an eerie creak in the mantel, and then a sudden crack as the rags and molted papers burst apart. Snape ducked instinctively and threw up a shield to stop the disgusting bits of material from landing on them as they snowed down. Remaining on the mantel was a carved box, likely the only other possession of the Gaunts that had been worth any value.

"Think it'll work if we stab the box?" Harry asked, dusting off his jeans. At Snape's disgruntled look he gave a sigh.

"Thought I'd ask."

The rain outside started pouring heavier, seeping through a crack in the window frame and puddling onto the floor. More mice skittered about, running along the edge of the wall and staying to the shadows, and a not-so-little garden snake made a strange noise as it slithered across a wooden ceiling beam above them.

"This is a creepy place," Harry muttered, his wand out. Both of them had removed their watches and transformed them to daggers.

"I will remove it from the box," Snape decided, gripping and regripping his wand. "If it stays there, stab it. If it doesn't..."

"Call it," Harry finished.

With less effort than Harry thought it would take, Snape had the box open. Nothing happened right away, and Snape could just see over the lid that the ring was nestled in there. Switching hands, Snape raised the dagger with his right and prepared to strike.

It was Harry who saw them first.

A small brown adder, with yellowed diamond markings on its head and a questioning flick of its tongue, emerged from the fireplace. It was followed by a larger smooth snake, which slithered to the left of Harry, around his boots.

"Snakes," Harry warned, training his wand on them. At the same time, Snape swung his arm down and they both jumped back as the box exploded.

Crashing to the floor, Harry searched frantically through the rubbish piles for the glittery black stone of the ring. Snape was also searching, unconcerned about the progression of thin and short snakes coming from the fireplace.

"I have seen you before, Severus Snape, the man with the intense desire to succeed," the horcrux suddenly proclaimed.

"You missed?!" Harry yelped, searching faster. Unlike the others, this one didn't release any smoky black shadows, likely because it would have been bloody useful to find it.

"It exploded," Snape barked back, whirling his dagger in the direction of the voice.

"All the Dark Arts training in the world, and you couldn't stop my curse from killing him," the horcrux continued, its raspy voice coming from near the fireplace poker. *"And the boy you think of your own, how will you ever be able to save him when the time comes?"*

Snape growled at that, viciously blasting away bits of fireplace wood and unidentifiable textiles from the floor. He finally hit upon the ring, and they both watched it bounce through the air to land in front of the fireplace.

"Don't listen to it!" Harry shouted, watching Snape ready the dagger. "It's lying, you've already saved my life!"

In one horrible moment Snape destroyed the last horcrux, smashing the stone with such force that the dagger blade cracked as well. The taunting voice stopped immediately, not having enough magic in it from the sixteen year old Riddle to last very long. At the same time, Harry watched in silence as a tiny mouse skeleton dropped out of the fireplace, closely followed by the second biggest snake he'd ever seen. Snape, who was on the floor by the horcrux, right by the hearth, had no time to move.

"DAD!" Harry bellowed, lunging forward just as the snake did, his desire to apparate so strong that he blacked out as he and Snape disappeared.

...

Harry had no idea how long he'd been out for, but one of the first things he realized when he came to was that he was sprawled over Snape. And that his body covered a good portion of his professor's, meaning he'd grown back into his regular size. Sitting up immediately, Harry searched Snape's body for any evidence of a snake's bite, waking the man up as he roughly searched the man's collar. There was blood, not a huge amount, but a steady flow from the scars that Nagini had once left. They looked like they'd been opened again, as if Snape had scratched himself badly.

He also had blood on his right shoulder, and Harry fumbled with the woollen material of Snape's jacket to see how bad the bite marks were.

"Wake up, please wake up," Harry pleaded, sighing in relief as the dark eyes opened a moment later. Snape coughed darkly, some blood appearing in the corner of his mouth as he tried to sit up.

"I have to get you to the infirmary," Harry needlessly said, his arm around Snape's shoulders.

"My..." Snape whispered, and somehow Harry understood. They'd reappeared in the Shrieking Shack, a place Harry had never wanted to return to, and in the village outside he could hear explosions. At first Harry thought the battle was still on, worse carnage than when they'd first gone through it, but then he considered that they sounded like fireworks. Desperate to know if it was safe out, and if what they'd done had killed Voldemort, Harry scrambled as he thought of how to find out.

"Tempus," he finally cast, watching as the date wrote itself in the air. *May 3, 1998 4:46 am.* "The battle's over," Harry said, his face breaking into an uneasy smile. "I think I went to the forest at four."

Snape raised his hand a little, and Harry grasped it. Taking a chance that the castle's wards were down, and he wouldn't end up in the future, Harry held tight and apparated them to Snape's flat.

It looked much the same as it had when Harry was last there, with the exception of a lot more books and some unrolled maps on the coffee table. Harry didn't have any time to look that thoroughly though, he simply walked through the living room with Snape to the one room he'd never been in - Snape's bedroom.

Harry managed to ease Snape onto the bed, before running to the lab and fetching the first aid supplies. Snape kept them well marked and on a prominent shelf for ease and speed of retrieval, and Harry was very happy to see a small vial of phoenix tears there still. When he returned to the bedroom he wasn't surprised to see that Snape had done a rudimentary clothing spell to change himself into a nightshirt.

"I'll have to go out soon," Harry said, carefully dripping some tears onto Snape's neck and shoulder. "I need to see Ron and Hermione, I need to know what's happened."

Snape looked exhausted, and Harry wondered if the venom from the snake at the Gaunts' shack was lingering in his body, or if Nagini's bite was still affecting him. The tears seemed to be working to heal the wounds, though the scars were not diminishing.

"Kreacher!" Harry suddenly called, balling up the towels he'd used to clean Snape's neck. The little house elf appeared with gusto, the locket dangling from his neck and an utterly demented look on his face.

"Master is alive!" Kreacher said, standing up straight and staring at Harry in confusion. A little dagger was in his hand, and it looked sharper than the ones Harry and Snape had been using for the horcruxes.

"What?" Harry asked. "Of course I'm alive."

"Kreacher has just been in the Great Hall. Miss Bella has said that Master Harry is dead."

Kreacher said this blandly, as if he believed Bellatrix over the physical and alive form of Harry standing before him. He wiped the small specks of blood off his knife before tucking it not-so-carefully into the belt of his uniform, and gave Harry a considering look.

"Master is alive."

"Yes, I'd realized that," Harry tiredly said. On the bed, Snape looked drained and amused. "What happened to Voldemort?"

"Miss Bella says that Master Harry and He Who Must Not Be Named died in the forest. Miss Bella is to be leader."

"Oh no," Harry said, a sick feeling in his stomach. "Kreacher, where is she?"

"In the Great Hall," Kreacher answered. He didn't sound overly concerned. "Miss Bella is dead."

"I need to...she's what?" Harry asked, freezing where he stood. He'd pulled his wand out and zipped up his jumper, ready to go out and fight again.

"The blood traitor Wea -"

"Kreacher," Harry warned, his voice deep and stern.

"The Weasley mother killed her," Kreacher corrected, unperturbed by the admonishment.

"Both Voldemort and Bellatrix are dead? Are you absolutely sure, Kreacher?" Harry asked, feeling like it was almost too good to be true.

"Oh yes, Kreacher has seen the bodies," the house elf replied.

"And they think I'm dead too?" Harry asked. He collected the supplies he'd dumped in his haste onto Snape's bed and placed them on the bedside cabinet, noticing a plain labelled bottle beside Snape's reading glasses. Snape had been taking snake antivenin.

"Yes," Kreacher answered. "Master's friends will be most relieved."

"Yeah..." Harry trailed off, suddenly wanting to see his friends so much that it hurt. His two best friends, who were his age and remembered everything they'd gone through together. "I should go. Thanks Kreacher, you can go. But don't tell them I'm back!"

Harry got the last words out just as Kreacher disappeared, likely off to the kitchen to party with the other house elves.

"Go to your friends," Snape said, his voice a mere whisper. "I will watch the events in a pensieve later."

"All right," Harry hesitantly replied, watching over Snape. "It's safe to leave you?"

That got Snape's attention, and he cracked one eye open.

"Potter. They think you're dead."

"Right," Harry said, stepping back from the bed and turning for the door. "I'll be back. I'll bring you some breakfast later."

He'd made it to the door, casting a very light monitoring spell in the room. Hermione had taught it to him, when he himself had been bitten by Nagini. Harry should have asked permission to cast it, but he figured Snape would say no and Harry just wanted to use it to ease his own worries.

"Harry," Snape said, just as Harry had one foot through the doorway. Sure he'd been caught out, Harry looked down at the floor and waited.

"Why did you call me Dad?" Snape asked instead.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again, trying to think of an answer that wouldn't sound stupid or desperate. When he turned to face Snape, he found that the man still had his eyes closed. Lying back on his pillow, in a plain nightshirt and covered by thick wool blankets, Snape looked far less threatening and more human than he normally did.

"Because you've acted like one to me," Harry answered. He didn't wait for a response, partially afraid of what Snape would say, and partially wanting to let the man get his rest.

Harry passed quickly through the flat, stopping at the coffee table where he'd thrown the little rucksack-turned-wallet they had used. His invisibility cloak was folded up neatly inside, and

Harry pulled it out to cover himself with. It wouldn't do to run into someone in the halls on the way up to the Great Hall, and Harry wanted the time to think.

It seemed not even the portraits had stayed in their spots though, and all along the way out of the dungeons Harry experienced the castle quieter than it had ever been in the six years he'd lived there. The noise level rose with the stairs, and by the time he'd arrived at the main floor, Harry could hear the cheering and chatter, and what sounded like sporadic toasting of people's names.

Steeling himself to face whatever was on the other side, and hoping that not as many people had died this time around, Harry removed his cloak and carefully folded it to put in his jacket pocket. He put his hand on the door, his fingertips resting in a burn mark leftover from the Weasley twins all those years ago when they'd thrown the spectacular firework display at Umbridge.

"It's over," Harry whispered to himself. "We're alive."

He opened the door, temporarily blinded by the rising sun through the windows of the Great Hall. Thousands of candles hung in the air, the tables had been moved to the sides, and students and parents alike sat haphazardly on benches and the tables. Silence swept through the room at the opening of the door.

"HARRY!"

Hermione's shriek was heard first, closely followed by Ron's, and Harry was suddenly enveloped in his friends' arms. Deafening applause and cheers sounded, startling Harry and making him think for a second that a Death Eater had returned. He was soon surrounded by Hagrid, Arthur, Molly, his dorm mates, and the rest of the Weasleys, all happy to see him once again. Lastly, Harry was given a strong hug from Professor McGonagall, who had a few tears in the corner of her eyes.

"Don't ever scare us like that again, Mr Potter," she gently admonished.

"Yes ma'am," Harry smiled.

"Now, I believe we'd all like to know where you've been hiding," she said, slightly louder. Just by raising her arms, McGonagall managed to quell the noise from the group and make a bit of room so Harry didn't feel as crowded. Hating the attention, but knowing that if he gave his speech once it'd be over, Harry cast a sonorous charm on his voice.

"I went to the forest to sacrifice myself, so you could all live," Harry bluntly said, holding his hand up when people started to protest his choice. "When I got there, Voldemort wanted to duel. We battled, and one of our spells imploded, causing us both to fall back. I suppose the Death Eaters checked, and thought us both dead."

It was so quiet in the hall that Harry thought he'd hear a pin drop, if there was one.

"Bellatrix came here, and, well I suppose you know better than I what happened next," Harry said. "But the reason I didn't come back first was because I went to find Headmaster Snape."

There were a few titters in the audience, and both McGonagall and Flitwick looked highly sceptical. Harry turned to focus on them, knowing it was them he wanted most to convince.

"He's been Dumbledore's spy ever since Voldemort went after my mother. I know he was mean, and I know he was spiteful and evil and very good at being a double agent. But he's saved my life a few times, and he did it again tonight. I know a lot of you remember last year, when Professor Snape killed Headmaster Dumbledore, and some of you won't believe me, but I need to say it. Snape did kill Dumbledore, but it was on Dumbledore's orders. He was already dying from a curse, and didn't want another boy, a schoolmate of ours, to become a murderer by order of Voldemort. Snape's been on our side the entire time."

Harry could tell that they were still doubtful, but he also realised that the shock of the battle was still very fresh and people weren't thinking with clear minds.

"All I can say is that Professor Snape spent the last three years actively trying to sabotage Voldemort, just so he could give me information to help me survive. He was ready to die tonight, just so I would win."

"Oh Severus," McGonagall said, holding up a tattered tartan handkerchief to cover her lips. "I think I will be having a long chat with Professor Dumbledore's portrait, but if what you're saying is true, he shall be remembered for what he was, a hero."

"He's still alive, Professor," Harry corrected, with a small smile. "That's where I've been, making sure Professor Snape survived."

"He's alive?" Flitwick asked, staring at Harry.

"Yeah. Attacked by a snake, twice, but he's survived."

"Are you serious, Harry?" Seamus asked, giving him the same doubtful look he had in fifth year when Harry had told everyone that Voldemort was back.

"Yeah," Harry answered, scratching his arms. "I know it sounds mental, but it's true."

Harry cancelled the sonorous charm and looked around the room at his friends and acquaintances and colleagues, never more glad to be home at Hogwarts than he was right now. Conversation had started up in the room again as people debated this new development and Harry felt grounded by the touch of Hermione's hand on his back and Ron holding his wrist, almost a desperate measure from them to make sure he couldn't disappear anywhere. Harry looked about and felt the grin on his face slipping into a smaller smile as he started to notice the faces that were still missing. George, standing quietly beside his older brothers, leaning slightly to his right where there was nothing but empty air. Dennis Creevey clutching tightly to a camera, his two classmates talking in small tones to him. And Harry scanned the room side to side, but still couldn't find either of Remus or Tonks' smiling faces.

"They still died," Harry quietly said, anger and queasiness twisting his stomach.

"For a better future," Ron answered. He and Hermione were giving him very concerned looks, and it was then that Harry realized how damn tired he was.

"I want to go to bed," Harry needlessly said. Professor McGonagall, who'd not gone very far from him, gave him a quick smile.

"Just don't leave the castle, we're rebuilding the safety wards now."

But Harry knew exactly where he was going to sleep. After finding out from Flitwick that there were guest suites in the lower levels of the castle, Harry saw Ron and Hermione off to one of the more secluded ones. He knew they wanted private time, and they looked even worse off than he was. The only question that Ron had for him was a straight forward one.

"Is it true?"

Harry swallowed loudly and nodded.

"He made a promise the night my mother died, to protect me with his life."

Ron gave a satisfied nod at that, and Hermione smiled. So many people had turned sides over the war; they'd certainly had fierce debates about Snape's loyalty and neither Ron nor Hermione seemed to be overly surprised to hear that Snape turned out to be against Voldemort all along. Harry only wished the rest of his schoolmates and the wizarding world would be as easy to convince.

With the promise of a patronus summons when they awoke, Harry continued further into the dungeons, back to Snape's office. He was only a little surprised that the wards let him in, but gratefully peeled off his jacket to hang on the coat rack in the little hallway, and dropped his shoes by the door. He felt like passing out at any moment, but he wanted to get the grime from the night and the Gaunts' house off his body. The shower in the main washroom was small but serviceable, and Harry had the hottest water he could stand beating down on him. The linen cupboard at the end of the hall had a pair of pyjamas that looked suspiciously like the ones he'd worn before, and after a quick resize spell he slipped into them. Behind the couch was his army cot, folded up against the wall and without bed linens as if it hadn't been used in many years. A quick flick of Harry's wand made the bed and gave him sheets, and just before climbing in, Harry grabbed his familiar blanket from the couch. Now he could sleep, in the place he'd always felt safe sleeping, knowing the war was done.

Chapter 11

The very first thing that came to Harry's mind as he started to wake up was that he could smell bacon. Not overly cooked, but just at the perfect temperature. In addition to the smell of bacon, he could also discern an underlying scent of baked banana cake.

"Mmm," Harry said to himself, as he slowly got up out of his army cot. He didn't bother changing out of pyjamas, but instead draped the knitted couch blanket over his shoulders like a cape.

"The sleeper awakes," Snape said, as Harry slowly walked into the kitchen. There was a plate of steaming hot banana muffins in the middle of the small kitchen table, and a pan of bacon on the stove.

"Sorry," Harry apologized, focused on the muffins and picking one closest to him. "Time's it?"

"Half two," Snape answered, sitting down and putting the bacon on the table.

"Oh," Harry said, catching the muffin crumbs with quick hands. "I meant to get up earlier."

"I suspect everyone will be out of sorts for a few days," Snape answered. He looked a lot more rested and awake than Harry felt, and his skin didn't have the same deathly paleness that it carried when they'd returned from the Shack.

"How's your neck?" Harry bluntly asked. He wasn't a student any longer, and he figured that Snape wouldn't mind the direct questioning. Harry got up to see to the kettle, which was chirping irritably at them. As he did, Snape wordlessly moved aside his collar, to display the slightly reddened skin.

"Oh, looks much better," Harry said, approvingly. "I think I could live the rest of my life without seeing you covered in blood like that again."

He brought two mugs to the table, where Snape already had the milk and sugar.

"I'm quite certain you have seen worse, throughout this war," Snape calmly said, stirring his milk and sugar into the tea. "In any event, I may require you to tend to the wound on my arm."

"All right," Harry said, grabbing some bacon. There wasn't an egg in sight, or toast for that matter, but Harry figured Snape had simply made the breakfast he wanted. Or late lunch, given the time.

"Most people that I saw were cursed cleanly," Harry said quietly, twisting the top part of another muffin off. "The worst I saw in this war was Hermione being tortured by Bellatrix, and you being attacked by that snake."

Snape gave him a studying look as he drank his tea, and Harry heard the slight clink of the spoon against ceramic as it was returned to the table. Harry didn't say anything further, not wanting to recall too much in detail the night that Bellatrix carved 'mudblood' into his best friend's arm.

"I have spoken to the Bloody Baron," Snape said, carefully peeling back the little paper cup around his muffin. "His memories of the past year match my own."

Harry looked up in dismay.

"Everyone that I saw seemed the same. People still died."

"People die in a war," Snape needlessly said.

"Yeah, but," Harry paused before reaching for more bacon. "Don't you feel cheated that after all we did, nothing changed?"

Snape gave him a twisted smile that was just short of a grimace.

"I've had practice with that for the last eighteen years," he replied.

...

After their odd breakfast, Snape left to find out what sort of damage the potions corridor, and his stores, had sustained. He also mentioned brewing a batch of pepper up and some sort of supplement potion. He'd given permission to Harry to discuss their different past with his two friends, but to swear them with secrecy if he did so. Harry sent his patronus off to find Ron and Hermione, and waited in Snape's office for them to arrive.

Both were surprised that Snape was nowhere in sight, and that Harry seemed to have free reign of Snape's office and flat. Leading them down the hallway to the living room, Harry quickly explained that he had a lot to tell both of them.

"Remember how there was about twenty minutes after I went to Voldemort that no one knew where I was?" Harry asked, watching his friends openly stare around the room.

"Yeah, mate," Ron said, checking out a wooden puzzle that Snape had on a side table. Harry stood by the bookcase, picking up the random forgotten tea mugs from the shelves and sending them back to the kitchen.

"We thought you'd died," Hermione carefully said, drifting toward the bookcases on the back wall.

"I didn't," Harry reassured them. "At least I don't think I did. I saw Professor Dumbledore, at Kings Cross, and had a chat with him. Then when I woke up, I wasn't in the forest with Voldemort. I was with Snape, and I was eleven again."

"What?" Ron asked, dropping down onto the couch. Harry tugged his blanket away to wrap around his shoulders.

"Snape and I were transported back to first year, to that night when I spied on him and Quirrell in the forest after the quidditch game."

"Have you had enough sleep, Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice full of concern. She had her finger on the spine of a thick book, but her attention was on him. "We destroyed all the time turners at the Ministry of Magic, remember?"

"I remember," Harry shrugged. "I don't know how we got there. But we found every horcrux again, except for Nagini, and we destroyed them."

"But they were still here," Hermione said. Her face was twisted slightly in confusion, and Harry knew she was trying to work out as quickly as possible what could have happened. "You couldn't have."

"We did," Harry asserted. "I just don't know how. Or why we went back."

"So," Ron started, sounding as if he was ready to strategize a chess game again. "Somehow you went back in the past and demolished the horcruxes. And you ended up back here."

"Yes," Harry said. "I know it sounds mad, but we really did. That's why Snape doesn't mind me being in his flat. I've been here a few times."

"Right," Ron agreed, looking around. "Doesn't look anything like a bat cave."

"Ron," Hermione admonished, with a roll of her eyes.

Harry ignored the jibe though, as he remembered being pleasantly surprised the first time he'd seen Snape's flat. It was small, and warm, and cosy with comfortable furniture. It was the kind of place that Harry would consider to be home.

Harry summoned Kreacher so they could get some tea and coffee, and then began summarizing their past seven years at Hogwarts. Everything he mentioned received a simple nod or a 'yes,' and with a sinking feeling, Harry realised that to Ron and Hermione, he must have sounded crazy to talk of going back in time.

"And you two, you went to the Chamber of Secrets to get extra Basilisk fangs?"

Ron put his hand on Hermione's knee, giving it a small squeeze.

"Yes. Nothing's changed, Harry," Hermione quietly said.

Harry slumped down into Snape's armchair, as Hermione leaned against Ron. He'd hoped that he'd just misunderstood something, that he'd been so tired going into the Great Hall that he'd just not noticed Remus, or Tonks, or Colin, or Fred.

"Fred's still gone," Harry said, dangling his hand uselessly off the side of the armchair.

Ron looked away, blinking rapidly. Hermione's hand was clutched tightly in his, and Harry knew it would be a long time before Ron got over the death of his brother.

"George has his portrait, at least," Ron gruffly said.

"They made portraits?" Harry asked, surprised. Usually portraits of people weren't made unless the subjects were rich, or very advanced in age.

"No one knew," Hermione replied. Ron still was staring at some spot on the wall. "They said they realised a little when you first came to school how dangerous things were going to be. And they've never done well when separated. So they've been painting portraits of themselves every year."

Harry had to smile at that, wondering if the first year portraits were painted well enough to actually work.

"They'll probably use the portrait to spy on people," Ron said, smiling through his sadness.

"Probably," Hermione groused. "Do you know how you ended up back there?"

"No," Harry said, twisting in the chair so he was more comfortable. "I was going to see Professor Dumbledore later to ask him."

"What exactly happened when you went back?" Ron asked.

"I saw Sirius again," Harry said, with a smile on his face. He spent the next near hour telling them all about his adventures back in first year. Ron had forgotten about being bitten by Norbert, and Hermione was embarrassed to remember how bossy she had been as a child. Harry told them about the Dursleys, and only very lightly touched on his Aunt's hateful truths. He did mention how well he and Snape had worked together, and how Snape had Muggle-baited the pub patrons in Little Hangleton.

At the end of his summary, Ron was shaking his head at the description of Harry saving Snape at the Gaunts' hovel, and Hermione was looking speculatively at Harry. Harry himself was feeling relaxed, and for the first time, like his trip back in time with Snape had been sometimes fun.

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The headmaster's office was silent as Harry entered at four, but Harry wasn't foolish enough to think that none of the previous headmasters knew he was there. Ghosts and other creatures wandered the halls of Hogwarts, but doors didn't normally open on their own, specifically the headmaster's office door.

Slipping off the cloak, Harry drew his wand and lightly warded the office. McGonagall was busy in the Great Hall with students returning to the school, and Harry knew he had at least an hour of peace. Dumbledore was watching him, his eyes bright and curious as Harry carefully placed the cloak onto the desk.

"Headmaster," Harry said, nodding toward the portrait.

"Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile. "I hear many congratulations are in order. Well done, well done."

Dumbledore was sincere and proud as he looked at Harry, and Harry smiled back.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe it's over," Harry admitted. Dumbledore was beaming at him, and the other headmasters in the portraits were quietly applauding.

"Yes, well, I imagine it will continue to be so for a while," Dumbledore told him. "How is Severus holding up?"

Harry traced his fingers along the edges of the desk, working out how to best answer the question.

"He's almost healed. But I think he's worried about what the Ministry will do."

Dumbledore sighed, and Harry could tell that it was a subject that had been on his mind for quite a while.

"I don't think he expected to survive, sir," Harry continued.

"No, I don't suspect he did," Dumbledore mused. "How did you managed to keep him alive?"

"I...I don't know," Harry admitted. He turned the desk chair to face the portraits and sat down heavily in it. "That's what I came to ask you about."

"Ask away, my boy," Dumbledore kindly said, sweeping his hand open in invitation.

"I don't know how he survived. I don't know how I did either. I did exactly what I was supposed to, I walked into the forest and let him kill me," Harry said, rushing it out in a jumble of words. It all sounded so surreal, like the plot to a bad film. "I talked to you for a little, in between life and death, but instead of coming back here, I went back to 1991."

Bemusement immediately crossed Dumbledore's face, and the other portraits were deathly silent as they listened in.

"Most interesting," Dumbledore said. "The same date?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "Sometime in February, after the quidditch match when Snape refereed. I was the same size as I was as a first year, but I remembered everything."

"Perhaps it was simply a glitch in time travel," Armando Dippet suggested.

"But nothing changed," Harry said, his shoulders slumping. "We went through the horcruxes again, destroyed them all, and the last one finally brought us back here. And it should have changed. Without the diary, the Chamber of Secrets wouldn't have been opened. Without the diadem, Crabbe would still be alive, and the locket, we'd have never had to go to that cave."

He looked up, blinking his eyes clear as he stared at Dumbledore.

"We destroyed the ring. If it had worked, you would still be alive."

"One can't be so certain, Harry," Dumbledore said in an apologetic tone. "The ring was also the resurrection stone, and I have never been good at resisting that sort of temptation."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, agitating it and making his fringe stick up in random directions. It was a bad habit, and perhaps he'd ask Snape to give him a hair cut later.

"I guess we all have our weaknesses," Harry said, staring at his shoes. They were dirty and scuffed, but Harry didn't know if it was from the recent battle, or from the trip to the Gaunts' hovel.

"We certainly do," Dumbledore freely agreed. "But I'm far more interested in the extraordinary trip that you and Severus took, Harry. Much more so interested in that, than in my own shortcomings."

"I was somewhat hoping that you'd have known about it," Harry wryly said. "Or perhaps caused it."

Dumbledore appeared to give this serious consideration, before shaking his head.

"I'm afraid not even the dead can influence time as such. I suspect, though, what you undertook was not time travel at all."

Harry looked up at him and was rather glad to note that he wasn't the only one looking at Dumbledore like the man had gone off.

"I went back to first year," Harry slowly said. "Helped free Hagrid's dragon, fought against Quirrell, wrote all the exams."

"And destroyed horcruxes," one of the portrait headmasters chimed in. Harry nodded.

"And destroyed horcruxes. But it didn't change any thing."

"Oh, on the contrary Harry. I believe it did. Just perhaps not in this universe."

Harry was glad he was sitting down, because once again he found himself in the position of not having a bloody clue what Dumbledore was talking about. He wondered if he'd ever learn enough of the wizarding world to understand it.

"I don't understand, sir," Harry finally said. "The last time we used a time turner, everything we did had a consequence."

"Yes, of course," Dumbledore mused, standing up in his portrait and stretching his back. "Are you familiar with quantum theory?"

Harry felt his jaw go slack as he stared.

"Let's pretend I'm not," Harry said.

Dumbledore chuckled in his portrait, and ignored his colleague's curious stares. Evidentially they'd not heard of the theory either.

"Severus' sarcasm is infecting, it seems. Quantum theory, and multiverse theory, is a very fascinating branch of Muggle science. Neither of us would have enough time to properly discuss it, but imagine that there exists a universe for every possible state of being of an object."

Seeing that Harry had yet to say anything, and that the rest of his audience was silently listening, Dumbledore continued on.

"A universe where you were sorted into Slytherin, where your friend Ronald perhaps chose not to wear his Weasley jumper at Christmas, where Ms Granger did not manage to pass one of her examinations." He looked down at Harry, focused only on him, and quietly finished. "Even universes, multiple ones, in which your parents were still alive."

Harry closed his eyes, refusing to look at anyone until the bitterness from his forming tears wasn't as strong. Parallel universes where his mum and dad lived, and he knew that he'd still never get to them. It just wasn't in the cards for him.

"So, you're saying that Snape and I didn't go back in time, we just went to another universe," Harry said, his voice steady. He didn't cry when he'd faced Voldemort, and he certainly wasn't going to cry now. "Why that one? Why not one in the same time period, or one where Voldemort never existed at all?"

"I'm not entirely certain," Dumbledore said, unabashedly. Harry supposed though that if one was as smart as Dumbledore was, there wasn't any shame in admitting to sometimes not knowing the answer.

"Brilliant," Harry said, with a sarcastic huff. "So somehow Professor Snape and I went to another universe, spent five months there, destroyed a bunch of horcruxes, and came back here to find it wasn't worth anything."

"Wasn't it?" Dumbledore asked. "You left that world with all its horcruxes destroyed, and Voldemort indisposed?"

"Locked up in Gringotts," Harry mumbled.

"Then I believe you did a great many good deeds, Harry. That's not something to be taken lightly."

Harry's head snapped up as he glared at the portrait.

"I did work for another world!" Harry growled, still unsure of the full understanding of the topic. "Someone just...just called a time out, and yanked us back to another world so we could be the heroes there too! Like we were just toy soldiers for their use."

"Harry, I never meant to use you, if that's how you felt here. I wanted you to have a normal life, as normal as you could have before coming to Hogwarts."

"Have you *met* the Dursleys?" Harry muttered under his breath. He crossed his arms in the chair, sitting straight up against the back of it. He was feeling defensive, and annoyed.

"I have, and I regret that I was not able to provide a better home for you to grow up in. But it had to be done," Dumbledore said.

Harry gritted his teeth in anger.

"For my safety, or to make sure I'd grow up to play the hero?"

"You grew up to do what was right," Dumbledore immediately countered. "Even in a different universe, you knew to do what was right."

"For nothing!" Harry burst out, frustrated. "Five bloody months we were there. What was all that for if it meant everyone in this world still suffered from the war?"

"Can you think of nothing that has changed in the time that you left and returned?"

"No," Harry immediately answered, sounding every bit the sullen teenager he hadn't often had the chance to be. "There was only about twenty minutes between when we left and when we came back."

Dumbledore remained silent, the only noise from his portrait from the cellophane wrapper of the lemon drop he had in his hand.

"Well, when I left. I'm not sure about how long it took Snape to get there."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "Where did Severus come from?"

"From a similar place," Harry answered. He crossed his feet and threaded his fingers together in his lap. "I think he went to Spinner's End, and talked to my mum."

"How curious," Dumbledore said, tugging very lightly on his beard. "And then you appeared back in first year."

Harry nodded, looking around the room and noticing the little trinkets of Snape's in the room. A small cauldron paper weight, three tea mugs on various shelves, and a packet of chocolate biscuits on a side table.

Dumbledore gave him a kind look.

"Severus lived," he gently said, keeping his gaze steady as Harry's green eyes narrowed. "You destroyed them all, you went through the tasks, and you came back. And everything was the same, except Severus lived."

Harry didn't say anything to that, instead fighting the image of Snape dying in the Shrieking Shack in his mind again.

"When I was a child, I didn't think twice about what his life turned out to be. But when I saw him there, with Nagini..." his voice trailed off as Harry searched around the room to see if he could see any other personal items of Snape's.

"I've always thought it was my greatest regret to never tell of Severus' great sacrifices for you. I do believe that he is the reason you travelled to another dimension."

"So I could bring him back alive?" Harry asked. He was ignoring the other portraits, and they were remaining silent to listen in to the conversation. "But why him? Why not Remus, or Sirius, or Fred, or...my parents?"

In the portrait, Dumbledore unwrapped another lemon sweet and popped it in his mouth.

"Not that I'm not happy he's alive," Harry hastily corrected.

"You were transported back to Hogwarts, on the eve of your second official quidditch match, in which Severus was the switch-in referee," Dumbledore summarized, not giving Harry any time to agree. "A task that he demanded, after having to save your life at the first match."

"Yeah," Harry said, blushing slightly as he remembered how he and Ron and Hermione had been convinced that Snape had been the one cursing the broom.

"How did he die, Harry?" Dumbledore softly asked.

"Nagini. She attacked him, right in front of us," Harry answered, his eyes unfocused as his mind recalled the image of Snape writhing, trying unsuccessfully to fend off the giant snake.

"And just before you returned here?"

"We were destroying the horcrux, in the Gaunt house. A big snake came out of the fireplace, I think it was an adder, and Snape didn't have time to move away. It lunged to attack and I didn't even think, I just grabbed him and tried to apparate."

"You saved his life," Dumbledore said, his voice warm with pride and satisfaction.

"I suppose so," Harry said, slightly uncomfortable. There were things one just had to do, and he'd never thought twice about trying to save Snape. It had nothing to do with pay back, or wanting to be a hero.

"War has casualties, Harry. We all lose, in the end, and you have certainly lost more than others. I suspect, however, that you have also gained something, an ally, and a powerful one at that."

Harry pressed his lips together in a small smile, remembering how Snape had been confused about Harry calling him Dad. It had been a heat of the moment reaction, but Harry knew he'd said it because Snape had acted like a father, like a real guardian to him. He'd always convinced himself that he was too old now to need a parent, that he was independent enough not to need the support, but after spending five months destroying horcruxes with Snape, Harry recognized that he enjoyed having someone watch out for him from the shadows.

"I think you may be right," Harry said, standing up from the chair and yawning. "At the very least, we mostly get along now."

There were a few titters of laughter, from the portraits who had either been privy to some of their volatile past, or had heard of it. Harry claimed exhaustion and said his farewells, heading toward the door before his allotted hour was up. The office still technically belonged to Headmaster Snape, but Harry wasn't sure if Professor McGonagall would be stopping in.

"Remember, Harry," Dumbledore called, just as Harry had gotten to the door. "Severus has had precious few people in his life willing to defend him. As the ministry is rebuilt, you may find yourself needing to fill that role."

Before Dumbledore could finish, and maybe admonish Harry not to let Snape down, Harry interrupted him.

"Don't worry. I will."

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When Harry returned to the flat, Snape was in the washroom. Harry assumed he was having a bath, as light music could be heard through the door, but there was no sound of running water from the shower. He padded into the kitchen and got some juice from the fridge, before turning to look through the room.

The *Daily Prophet* had been delivered, but so had the *Quibbler*, oddly. Of all periodicals, Harry never expected Snape to read the *Quibbler*. Upon reflection, and Harry glancing at the special one page battle edition of the newspaper, he realised that Snape would have wanted access to any and all sources of information in the war.

Already there were articles heralding the fighters and defenders of Hogwarts, and Harry's speech had also been quoted and misquoted. The *Daily Prophet's* headlines were no less sensational, but were focused more on the events and major players in the battle. Harry's speech was mentioned again, along with quotes (both positive and negative) of participants, on their reactions to Snape's ultimate role.

Fully awake and paying attention, Harry spread the paper out on the table and read every article about the battle he could find. Most still had wild inaccuracies, and Harry figured tomorrow morning's would be much more detailed. He was able to pick out a few themes though, that the Hogwarts defenders had done what they could, that the Ministry was driving to beef up their security to prevent another such infiltration, and that a massive and very thorough hunt for any remaining Voldemort supporters would be launched, to prevent another uprising.

Having been on the wrong side of public opinion more than a few times, Harry was very wary of the hunt. Like most policies, it sounded good on paper, but Harry could see it easily slipping into the Ministry's version of the snatchers.

Remembering Dumbledore's parting warning, Harry entertained an idea in his mind that he'd thought of just before falling asleep earlier that morning, twisting it slightly to better fit their situation.

Harry had just summoned Kreacher and quietly asked him to fetch some forms when the door to the washroom finally opened. Snape strode out, in his regular trousers and white dress shirt. It wasn't fully buttoned up, and he had an eyedropper of something in his hand.

"Any sales at Slug and Jiggers?" Snape asked, nodding at the paper.

"Er, no," Harry answered, glancing down at the paper. "Just a lot of rubbish about the battle and going on a hunt for Voldemort supporters."

Snape sat carefully in his favourite armchair, easing his shoulder out of the shirt. His upper bicep was bruised purple and black, with two bite imprints from the Gaunt's house snake. It looked extremely sore.

"Hmm," Snape said, a noise he made when he was considering something. "Not a hunt for Death Eaters."

"No," Harry answered. He stood up and walked over to the chair, holding out his hand for the eyedropper. "Specifically a hunt for lingering Voldemort supporters."

"Directly on the wound, three drops," Snape instructed, holding his arm still.

"All right," Harry replied. "I think Kingsley will be pushed for Minister. If he is, we won't have a problem."

"Perhaps," Snape agreed, wincing. The potion in the dropper was working, but it looked to be tightening the tender muscles of Snape's arm. "In my experience, the Ministry tends to ask questions only after it has acted."

Harry handed back the dropper and summoned a clean linen wrap to cover the sensitive bites.

"I might have an idea for that, Dad."

Snape's arm tensed, and he looked at Harry with a guarded glare.

"If you tell me you plan to run for Minister of Magic, I will personally have you committed."

It wasn't anywhere near what Harry expected Snape to say, and he gave a little huff of surprised laughter.

"I'd probably commit myself. My idea, actually, is for you to...well. Adopt me."

He steadfastly did not look at Snape, instead taking his time to ensure the linen was firmly wrapped around the bite wounds. The silence stretched on until Harry fastened the wrap, and Snape finally answered in a low tone.

"You are surely a bit old for adoption."

It wasn't a no, and Harry took that as a very good sign. In the pub in Little Hangleton Snape had been perfectly happy to pretend Harry was his son, and Harry suspected he'd viewed their

relationship as such since he'd first arrived at Hogwarts. Except perhaps more like an irritating stepson.

"Maybe," Harry said, as neutrally as he could. "So it would be more of a symbolic adoption. But I think it'd make people less likely to go after you in this Voldemort hunt, and I - I like that in the past five months you've been there and haven't had to hate me. It'd be nice to have someone tell me if I was making the wrong decision with something."

"I hadn't ever planned to stop telling you that," Snape answered, ignoring Harry's rolled eyes. He deftly did the buttons of his shirt back up and pulled the collar forward to hide his injuries.

"I will consider it, Harry," Snape said, plucking one of the newspaper pages from the table. "It is admittedly quite satisfying to see that the child I vowed to protect has grown into a reasonable and less irksome adult."

"Thanks," Harry said, with a quirk of his head. "I think."

They were at an awkward time of the day, just past five, when it should technically be close to dinnertime. But neither were overly hungry, and were rather lethargic from the long morning's nap. Snape had picked a thin book about gardening from his shelves to read, and had a hot cup of tea by his side. Harry had been told to entertain himself, and was browsing through a clothing catalogue on the couch. The war was over now, and he supposed it was time to get some grown up clothes.

By unspoken agreement, both Harry and Snape were hiding in the dungeons. Upstairs there were students, parents, professors, and other witches and wizards wandering about the castle, along with members of the press and Aurors. The Aurors were there to question whomever they encountered, to ensure the castle's inhabitants remained safe. Harry knew that Snape would likely be in for a long interview with them, but today wasn't the day for it. Neither of them were focused enough for inquisitions.

"Attention all students and staff."

Harry perked up on the couch, staring wildly around the room. Snape looked up over the rim of his reading glasses, his finger tapping the top of his page.

"The speaker is in the fire alarm," Snape said, unconcerned about the burst of Professor McGonagall's voice into the room.

"A full congratulatory feast will be served in the Great Hall in half an hour. All are welcomed to attend, press excluded."

Harry's stomach rumbled, and as much as he didn't want to go out in public, in the last year of camping he'd actually dreamed of Hogwarts' feasts and endless amounts of food.

"I suspect if we do not appear that a search party will be sent out," Snape huffed, flipping through his book.

"Probably," Harry said, with a small grin. "Maybe they'll have shepherd's pie, like at yesterday's pub."

...

Snape walked with his head held high as they went upstairs. Harry was sticking quite close to his side, smiling and greeting his schoolmates as they passed. Snape was on alert, expecting jeers and perhaps an errant hex, but whether Harry's presence beside him prevented it or not, nothing happened. He'd always had a bit of an overly pessimistic imagination, though it had served him well on the few surprise attacks he'd experienced as a younger Death Eater.

Snape hesitated slightly just before entering the Hall, his hand on the door tapping it softly. No matter public opinion, he was still Headmaster of the school, and still in charge of both the students and staff. It seemed like decades ago since he was last in the position, but Snape knew he needed to take charge, and not appear weak. He also knew, however, that the war was over and there was no longer a cause he could sacrifice to to keep in good opinion.

The Great Hall had certainly sustained a large amount of damage during the battle, but much like the rest of the school, was quietly healing itself as the minutes passed. Bricks slipped back into place, wooden beams creaked and whispered as they grew back together, and broken glass bits clinked as they reassembled themselves. The reconstruction would certainly go faster with the help of witches and wizards, but the castle could take care of itself until the morning.

The house tables were scattered amongst the rubble, rivalries forgotten for the greater good. More than enough room was cleared for people to sit and converse, and the tables had been set for a large feast of a dinner. It was reminiscent of the Leaving Feast held every June, though with a slightly darker undertone.

When both he and Harry entered, Snape was hyperaware of the silence that descended on the room. All heads turned to look at them, and a hurried wave of whispers carried through the tables. Snape pulled his sleeves down to cover his wrists, and equally met every stare.

Unexpectedly, movement started from a table to his left, where a group of students he'd not seen in a long time were sitting. Neville Longbottom, a boy he'd antagonised since his very first potions class, stood on slightly unsteady feet. He was wearing a tattered cardigan, of course the boy had gone to war in a cardigan, and had a bloodied and bruised face. Snape was certain the rest of Longbottom's body had not fared much better. Nonetheless, Longbottom easily sidestepped the broken bricks on the floor and approached Snape, his expression one of victory. Holding out a bandaged hand, Longbottom stood steady and fearless as he looked Snape in the eye.

"Thank you," Longbottom said.

Snape slowly extended his own hand and shook, well aware of how it appeared to the rest of the room. Longbottom was the leader of Dumbledore's Army all throughout the year before, and from what Harry had mentioned of the final battle, one of the bravest defenders.

"We all fought equally," Snape said, in response.

"Maybe, but the food packages we found certainly helped," Longbottom answered, with a cheeky grin on his face. Snape reflected that had he and Potter been working together during their seventh year, the Carrows never would have stood a chance.

Snape nodded at that, the only admission he would give that he had anything to do with it. Annoyed with the crowd continuing to stare at them, Snape raised his hand and snapped his fingers, causing the food waiting below to be instantly delivered to the tables. A rush of chatter started again as people started serving themselves. One of the first things he'd learned as a Headmaster was that the snap of his fingers worked just as well to summon the meal as a speech.

"Severus."

His name was called in a half laugh, half admonishment, and Snape was for a second wary of attack. It was Minerva though, Minerva smiling at him and touching his shoulder softly as if she was truly glad to see him again.

"Harry!"

A table at the front was filled with a large collection of redheads, Potter's best friends, and a few members of the Order.

"See you after dinner," Harry distractedly said. He trotted off from beside Snape, enveloped quickly within the large group of Weasleys. Snape watched him go, before being lead to a seat next to Minerva's.

The platters of food were steaming and giving off hundreds of enticing scents. Goblets of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and other juices were scattered throughout the tables, and some dessert platters were already sneaking up amongst the roast and mashed potatoes. Snape reflected that the Hall, while broken, hadn't looked this alive in more than a year.

"I wish you could have told us," Minerva said. "You played your part so well that some people still don't believe what Harry told us."

And it was certainly obvious. He's wrapped the bite marks on his neck to prevent people from staring, but they were anyway. Some in open curiosity, some in disdain.

"I believe testimony will be given by Albus, should it be needed," Snape answered.

"It'll be a start," Minerva said, pouring herself some sherry. She, like Snape, remembered that the Ministry of Magic didn't exactly embrace Dumbledore with open arms.

"Potter wants me to adopt him," Snape said, neatly spearing a piece of roast.

Beside him, Filius Flitwick started choking on a piece of ham.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Legally become the guardian of Harry Potter," Snape rephrased. He had underestimated how hungry he was, or perhaps forgotten how well the house elves cooked, and put more candied

yams on his plate.

"He's an adult," Minerva said, hesitantly as if she were trying to figure out the reasoning behind it. "He doesn't need a legal guardian."

Snape was about to answer, but Filius beat him to it.

"Maybe not a legal one, but the boy could use a family of his own. And it would put you in very good standing, being the guardian of the Boy Who Lived."

Snape smiled to himself. The Sorting Hat had certainly placed Filius in the correct house as a boy; he was usually the first to see through the motivations for a plan.

"I quite agree. It seems I have underestimated his skills as a strategist," Snape calmly replied.

....

Snape returned to his flat late in the evening, after spending two hours in conversation with Albus Dumbledore. That he could freely speak, now that the war was over, was a novel concept and it was like lifting weights off his shoulders as he and Albus finally were able to talk without playing a game of shadows.

Feeling much younger and more refreshed than he had been in years, Snape returned to his darkened flat. It had been tidied, but there were a stack of papers on the coffee table and the knit blanket from the couch was missing. Snape picked up the papers and skimmed them, only slightly surprised to find that the bundle was actually an application to adopt an individual. Harry hadn't filled any of it out though; as if he wasn't sure Snape would want him.

Looking around the room, Snape saw that Harry's jacket was hanging on the back of Snape's desk chair, and that his shoes were haphazardly tucked against the wall near the door. Peering around the back of the couch, Snape saw a messy head of black hair on a white pillow. Harry was scrunched up on his red army cot, with the blankets pulled up around his shoulders and his glasses resting on the little stool by the wall.

"This will be a disaster in the making," Snape murmured, noticing that Harry was drooling on his pillow.

Papers still in hand, he turned to go to his own room, picking up a quill from the desk along the way.

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