To Shape and Change

by Blueowl

AU. Time Travel. Snape goes back in time, holding the knowledge of what is to come if he fails. No longer holding a grudge, he seeks to shape Harry into the greatest wizard of all time, starting on the day Hagrid took Harry to Diagon Alley. No Horcruxes.
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To Shape and Change

Disclaimer: I obviously don't own the idea of Harry Potter or any of the money making forms of it.

Summary: AU. Time Travel. Snape goes back in time, holding the knowledge of what is to come if he fails. No longer holding a grudge, he seeks to shape Harry into the greatest wizard of all time, starting on the day Hagrid took Harry to Diagon Alley.

A/N: I have taken the liberty of adjusting some of the canon things, so just be aware - - meaning Snape comes from a future different from the actual HP novels. Oh, and **no** Horcruxes.

Chapter 1: A New Beginning

Severus Snape opened his eyes with a gasp. Had it worked? Was he back? He had had what could be considered a dream of him flying over Hogwarts and shooting within and into his body, but he hoped to Merlin that it hadn't been a dream. He desperately hoped it had actually happened. Sitting up and pushing the covers aside, he took in the area around him.

He was not in the corner room of a dilapidated muggle factory at the edge of a dying town. Instead, he was in his old quarters within Hogwarts.

Severus looked over to his nightstand and found the date. It was the first day of August, 1991.

It had worked.

Unimaginable relief washed over him, a feeling so foreign and strong that he was nearly overwhelmed. It had been so long since he had had anything to be relieved or happy about. Bringing his right hand up, he pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting back offending tears as he just breathed for a few minutes.

The last thing he had seen, before he woke up here, nine years into the past, was Harry.

Time travel of this scale demands a high concentration of magic. Very high. The amount only a fully grown and awakened Mage could give. And so, Harry had drained his core into the rune network and provided all of the power needed to send

Severus' soul back. The potions master swallowed. In the end, to give a new beginning, Harry had given his life.

After another moment, Severus had his emotions reigned in and stood up, calling his wand into his hand.

He had no time to waste. There was a lot to begin today.

O o O o O

Severus was by Slug & Jiggers Apothecary, waiting for the large form of Hagrid to enter Diagon Alley with little Harry trailing behind. He didn't need to wait long, and so, he watched with well hidden nervousness as they approached. Harry was bouncing happily behind the kind half-giant, taking in the amazing sights and sounds of the busy street.

"Good morning, Hagrid," Severus said smoothly, easing into their path and standing expectantly.

Hagrid shook himself, a little surprised. "Hello, Perfessor," he said cheerfully. "Was just helpin' 'Arry 'ere ter get his school supplies."

"I see," Severus replied curtly, keeping with his old mannerisms. He glanced at Harry and then looked back at Hagrid, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh! Oh, sorry, 'Arry, this is Perfessor Snape. He's goin' ter be another one of yer perfessors. He's also Head of Slytherin House. Perfessor, this is 'Arry Potter."

Harry held out his hand. "Hello, Professor Snape."

Severus took his hand, clasping it tightly for a solid second before releasing it. "Hello, Mr. Potter." He turned his eyes back to Hagrid, deciding to be even more direct than he usually was. "Hagrid, I understand you have an errand to run. If you wish, I shall take Harry to get his supplies. It would, after all, be more efficient that way. I will also take him home if you are unable to make it back in time."

Hagrid blinked, a bit confused. "Er, well, Perfessor Dumbledore had asked me—"

"To safely take care of that errand and to ensure Harry has his things for school before too long. As such, I see no problem in what I have proposed. I will just need Mr. Potter's key and ticket. I give you my word Mr. Potter will have all that he needs for Hogwarts before the end of the day."

Harry watched their conversation fixedly, looking back and forth between Severus and Hagrid.

"Uh, well, if you're sure, Perfessor. Thank you. It does make things a little easier." Hagrid looked down at Harry. "'Arry, you'll be alright with Perfessor Snape an' he'll be able tuh answer whatever questions you have 'bout classes. 'Kay?"

Harry glanced at Severus uncertainly, then looked back at Hagrid. He evidently felt he didn't really have a choice. He slowly nodded.

"Good lad. I will try to get back ter see yuh off, but if I don't, I'll see you at Hogwarts."

Harry tried to smile, but he was understandably a bit overwhelmed and a little hurt about being handed off to the darkly robed, stern looking professor so quickly and easily. What was this errand?

"Okay, Hagrid. Um, thanks for getting me off that island and bringing me here," Harry said.

"No problem, Harry, and if yer relatives cause yuh anymore trouble, just write ter me." Hagrid smiled, as if he just had a wonderful thought.

"Okay," Harry said, at the moment missing the fact he had no means to contact Hagrid.

With a nod, Hagrid pulled out Harry's key and ticket from his pocket and handed them to Severus before hurrying down the alley.

"Well, Mr. Potter, shall we?" Severus asked, stepping next to him and gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

Harry swallowed — Severus might have gone as far as classifying it as a gulp. "Yes, sir." Harry lifted up his school list. "Um, what should we get on the list first, sir?"

"No need for the list. I have it memorized, and I'll be adding a few things to it that will make your life easier later so you might as well put it away," Severus stated as he guided them into the smelly Apothecary. Harry gave no resistance, probably not wanting to risk angering the intimidating professor.

Going down an aisle, all of the other occupants in the store swiftly darted away upon seeing Severus. Fortunately, there were not many people there, but Severus was certain Harry had noticed the blatant shift. They paid no mind to the boy at his side, as Harry's hair was covering the famous scar.

Severus stopped, turning to the shelf. Harry stared around the shop, occasionally cringing when he spotted bizarre animal parts in jars or wrinkling his nose when he saw something particularly nasty looking.

"The list tells you to get a kit with basic potion ingredients, but I will tell you to get two scoops of all of the items here marked with a white tag to make your own kit. The kit has all of the same things, but only has one scoop of each. First time brewers make mistakes, but then because they don't have extra ingredients they don't bother to fix their mistakes and do things right. I do not want to see you do that."

"Okay, sir, but why doesn't the list just tell us to get two scoops?" Harry asked, the tension in his shoulders easing a little thanks to Severus' calm, kind tone.

"Because the Board of Governors feel that would raise costs too much, instead of realizing the few knuts they are saving parents are hindering the students' ability to learn." Severus' jaw clenched in dark resentment. The Board had certainly botched up things in the future and he knew they would do it again if something didn't change soon.

"A few knuts?" The boy's brow crinkled beneath his hair at the unfamiliar term.

"Ah, I see Hagrid hadn't gotten around to teaching you about money yet." Severus put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a few coins. He quickly explained what each was worth. Afterward, Harry became sheepish. "What is it?" Severus asked.

"Well, I don't have any money."

"Yes, you do. Your parents left you plenty at Gringotts, but I'll pay for right now. You may pay me back later."

Harry's eyes widened. "I will, sir, I will! Thank you!"

"It is no problem, now stop gushing," Severus stated flatly, the gushing reminding him that the boy was not the Harry he had left — or at least he wasn't yet.

Harry instantly became silent and blushed. He was now very thankful they were alone at the back of the shop.

Severus motioned Harry toward the empty containers arranged at the sides of the shelves. In comfortable silence, they began scooping the necessary ingredients into individual containers (two scoops each), before putting them into a potions case that would act as Harry's potions kit.

"Do not cast near ingredients if you can help it. It could inadvertently affect them. Another reason for the case — it acts as a magical barrier," he informed him as he shut the black leather case.

"Yes, sir."

They then went to the register and Severus paid before walking out and into the cauldron store across the street, the potion kit shrunken down to fit in his pocket.

"Now, let's get you a good cauldron. Not a pewter one, those melt ridiculously easily. Idiotic Board. It will be brass or copper for you," Severus said, heading to a quiet area of the store.

"Which is better, sir?" Harry curiously asked.

"Well, it depends on if you want a cauldron for more stable brewing - brass, or a cauldron that will help brew more potent potions - copper."

"Um, I should probably stick to the brass cauldron that will help stability," Harry admitted.

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. Your mother had a knack for potions," Severus commented offhandedly.

"M-my mum?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes, she was quite talented in Potions, though she was a little more gifted in charm work."

"You knew my mum?" Harry's voice was soft, as if he was afraid to hope. The green of his eyes seemed to darken with emotion behind his thick frames.

Severus locked eyes with him for a moment, deciding something. "We were in the same year and grew up in the same neighborhood."

"Wow. Were you friends?" Harry asked eagerly.

Severus gave a small, sad smile. "Yes."

Harry swallowed, staring at Severus. "I'll get a copper cauldron then."

"Very good. I sense you will find Potions quite natural if you put adequate effort in it."

"Really?"

"Trust me, Mr. Potter, I have the ability to sense these sorts of things," Severus said mysteriously.

In the future, Severus and Harry had put aside their animosity toward each other and worked together. Soon, they became good friends and were both surprised when they discovered Harry was quite talented in potions, not to mention magic in general. In Harry's nineteenth year, his magic had fully awakened, but it had been too late to save the Wizarding World that had swiftly fallen to Voldemort and his mighty lieutenants at the end of Harry's sixth year.

Looking at the boy before him right now, he wondered how much sooner Harry's magic could awaken if he helped him.

"What will I be bad at, sir? Can you sense that?" Harry asked, oblivious to Severus' thoughts.

Severus was a little taken aback at that, but quite pleased. Pushing aside his past regrets with the boy, he grabbed hold of the opportunity before him.

Severus pulled out his wand and waved it over Harry after discreetly raising privacy wards to prevent others from taking notice of them. Harry felt a warm sensation weave around him before it sucked into his center. Severus then tapped his wand on Harry's forehead. Harry's eyebrows rose and nearly disappeared into his hairline as he felt an invisible bubble emerge from between his eyes, below his scar, and pop.

Severus purposely showed a flicker of impressed surprise. He had a plan and he had to do it right.

"Interesting."

"Sir?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"What I cast was a spell telling the caster an individual's potential in things and sometimes important parts of their family line. The Legacy Spell. I would appreciate you not telling anyone I had cast it. For some reason, some people find it dark to know one's possible abilities and such." Severus rolled his eyes. "As if it'll lock a person's being on the findings, instead of realizing it is our *choices* that make us who we truly are, far more than *our abilities* or *blood.*"

Harry nodded slowly, taking in his words. "Well, I just wanted to know if there was a class I should put more time in. I understand what I might be good at won't shape me alone."

Severus gave Harry an approving smile. "Which is why I did what I did."

Harry looked up at him expectantly as Severus grew very serious and kneeled down to his level.

"I will not lie to you, Harry, so listen well to what I have to tell you, because that spell told me a lot of things. Your magic is very strong, and you have near limitless potential, but it is . . . locked, in a way."

"Locked?" Harry asked, his voice wavering. "Why? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you didn't do anything wrong, and it being locked is actually a good thing, if you do things correctly."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if your body hadn't subconsciously locked some of your magic, you would find control to be nearly impossible. Your magic being locked also allows you to build up your usable magic and fine-tune your control, making it stronger. And that is what it is about. You must learn control before you can really gain use of all of your magic, and for you to obtain the necessary control, you must practice and work very hard in learning all you can about magic."

"I'll do my best, sir. Um, did you find anything else?"

Severus gave a very faint smile. "You have many magical talents, though several of them are going to be out of your reach for some time. I'll discuss them with you once you've gotten stronger. However, there are some abilities you have access to now. You can speak parseltongue, the ability to talk to and understand snakes; did you know this?"

"Yeah, I went to the zoo earlier this summer. I spoke to a boa constrictor and . . . I sort of helped it escape." Harry looked down, his ears turning pink.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Helped it escape?"

"I-I didn't mean to. Dudley pushed me and then the glass just disappeared!"

Severus fought down a chuckle of amusement. Harry looked petrified. "Don't worry, Mr. Potter, it was just accidental magic, and I understand; but let's get back to talking with snakes. You speak parseltongue, an ability that is misunderstood by the Wizarding World. People here fear it, because of the Dark Lord. Hagrid told you about him, I trust?"

Harry nodded as his eyes widened. "You mean, he could talk to snakes like me?"

"Yes, so I believe it would be wise for you to tread carefully where it comes to that, but Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, professor?"

"Know when to reveal your abilities, but don't show off. Also, never try to *cover up* your abilities or hide in fear of them being discovered. Doing so won't help you or anyone else."

"Alright, professor. So this ability can be good?" Harry asked, uneasily.

"Very good. The most powerful healing and protection spells are from parselmagic, and only Parselmouths can use it. I'll give you a book about it if you are interested."

Harry smiled and nodded. "I'd like to read it."

"I also think you getting a snake would be for the best as well. They can help focus parselmagic."

"Did Voldemort use parselmagic?"

Severus smirked. "He didn't have the patience or desire to learn it. Parselmagic focuses on healing and manipulating magic to the benefit of others. The Dark Lord cares only about himself, why would he waste time in a magic devoted to others?"

"Oh," Harry said, thinking. "Do you think people would stay afraid of me speaking parseltongue if I helped people?"

Severus smiled. "I was hoping you would think of that. The muggle symbol for medicine is the Caduceus — two serpents going up around a staff with wings — for a reason. I think you learning parselmagic and using it would help others accept your ability."

Harry smiled.

"Which leads us to the next thing I had learned you should know. Your parseltongue ability does not come from what had happened to you when you were a baby."

"What do you mean?"

"You did not get that ability from the Dark Lord, as some people would likely believe when they learn you have it. It comes from your family line."

It was only after the death of Dumbledore that they had discovered Harry's family line and the legacy it had given him — when they had found the Legacy Spell. Dumbledore had not known and had come to incorrect conclusions, despite his best efforts. Severus was looking forward to Dumbledore's reaction when he learned the truth this time.

"My mom or dad could. . .?"

"No. It is something that has to be triggered by an individual's make up."

"You mean like genetics," Harry said, before continuing upon seeing Severus' eyebrows rise. "I saw my aunt watching a show about genetic disorders and things. Some of the things only happen when a baby gets a certain gene from both their mum and dad. If they get it from only one, the trait remains dormant or something."

Severus nodded. "Yes, this is a lot like that. The parselmouth-gene, so to speak, is awake in you thanks to gaining it from both of your parents. There are exceptions to the rule, but I won't get into that."

"That's wicked."

Severus gave a small nod. "Genetics and family line traits often can be." Severus paused, trying to decide how to move the discussion in the direction he wanted.

"Sir?"

Severus knew he was placing a lot on Harry's shoulders all at once and giving him a great deal to have to think about . . . but he had little choice. If the future was to be saved, he had to give Harry all the options he had available to him and as soon as they were viable. Before he had gone back in time, Harry had told him as much. He told him he wanted Severus to do all he could to give his younger self the tools to be all he could be, to be ready and able. And so, Severus swore he would do just that.

With his purpose clear, Severus plowed ahead, deciding to take on the most crucial issue first.

"You are a celebrity here, Mr. Potter. Things you do will be watched very closely. People will have made assumptions concerning you and expect certain things. I want you to be aware of that."

Harry stifled a huff. "Hagrid told me I'm famous. I hadn't believed him until I went into the Leaky Cauldron. 'The-Boy-Who-Lived.'" Harry shook his head. "I'm just Harry."

"I'm sorry to say you will never be 'just Harry' to the Wizarding World, Mr. Potter, and you are going to have to accept that."

"You don't seem to care who I am though. You're not treating me like a celebrity." Harry frowned, as if trying to figure out Severus' motives or label how Severus had been treating him.

Seeing this, Severus decided to comment, sincerity blatant in his smooth voice. "I want to help you because your mother was a friend of mine, and I see that investing in you would be beneficial to you and to her memory. I am quite . . . particular with whom I spend my time with. In you, I see a future wizard who your parents would be proud of, and I want to be a part of that."

Harry was visibly touched. No adult had ever said anything like that to him before, and though Hagrid seemed to care about him and had treated him nicely, it wasn't quite the same as this.

"Thank you, sir."

"You're very welcome, Mr. Potter," he said, before turning back to the shelf and removing a copper cauldron.

With that, Severus dropped the privacy ward and led them to the front to purchase the cauldron, before shrinking it and heading out. Upon nearing the door, Severus bit back a curse as he spotted someone he had hoped to avoid. Halting suddenly, he gripped Harry's shoulder tightly.

"Duck behind me and go to the back of the store and stay out of sight until I come get you, now!" he whispered sharply.

Harry instantly did as he was told, not about to disobey the man speaking in that commanding tone. He disappeared behind the shelves so quickly that the shop owner didn't even notice.

"Ah, Severus!" a male voice called.

"Lucius," he greeted neutrally, forcing away the memory of the pureblood's lifeless body crumpling before a tearful, but furious Draco.

"In need of some more cauldrons?" he asked, his voice pompously smooth.

"Just checking the quality of those in stock. I will need to purchase some not long after classes begin, just like every year," Severus sneered.

"I wonder who the unlucky soul will be this year who melts the first one. My vote is the Longbottom boy. Pitiful little wizard if I ever saw one. I cannot believe he actually got a letter. Dumbledore must have pulled some strings there because of the boy's parents," Lucius complained.

"Likely," Severus said, appearing to agree completely.

"Well, I must be off. Draco just got his wand and left with Narcissa. I have a few things to pick up in Knockturn before I head home."

"Very well. I look forward to seeing Draco in class," he said, his words truly genuine that time.

Lucius smiled and left with a parting nod.

Once Lucius was gone, Severus headed to the back of the shop where he told Harry to be. He found him not far from the back, just close enough to listen in on what was being said.

"Mr. Potter," he said. "I assume you heard all of that?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry if I wasn't supposed to."

"As long as you follow my instructions and use your head, I don't mind what else you do."

Harry tilted his head at that. "Okay."

"That man was Lucius Malfoy. Stay away from him if you can, but if you come across him and can't politely duck out, stand firm and be courteous."

"Why sir? And why didn't you want him to see me?"

"I will explain later today, just trust me when I say that he is not a man to be trifled with."

Harry nodded before stepping beside him, Severus guiding them to the pet shop - Magical Menagerie.

"The snakes are over here," Severus said softly, Harry barely hearing him over all of the noise in the store.

Coming in front of the glass cages, Harry paused, before quickly looking up at Severus.

"But the list only mentions owls, cats, and toads, would a snake be allowed?" Harry asked. "And I don't know if the Dursleys would be happy about me bringing a pet home."

"Exotic pets are allowed if approved by a head of house."

Harry gave a small smile. "And you're a head of house."

"Yes, I am," he stated simply, before continuing. "Once I approve your pet, I will need to cast some spells on it — to prevent it from poisoning any students if you choose a venomous snake, that sort of thing. But as for your . . . family . . . you need not concern yourself. I will have a conversation with them."

Harry's eyes widened, but found comfort in his words; although, he couldn't help but feel a little anxious about what this 'conversation' would entail. Harry got the feeling Severus did not like the Dursleys all that much and wondered why. It wasn't like he would know about what goes on in that house, right? But then, the letters had been addressed to the cupboard underneath the stairs. . . .

Harry turned his eyes back to the snakes hissing beyond the glass before glancing around.

"I'll let you know if anyone is close enough to hear you," Severus stated.

Harry nodded his thanks, before hissing something to one of the snakes, which caused all of the snakes to turn to him and hiss back. Harry giggled, and Severus wished, not for the first time, he knew parseltongue.

"Professor, I'd like that one," Harry said after a moment, pointing to a red, gold, and black snake.

Severus recognized it as a magical coral snake. Magical coral snakes had gold rings instead of yellow beside the red bands. This snake was only ten inches long, and Severus knew it would be some time before it grew beyond two feet. Good, it would be able to hide easily under the boy's robes.

"Male or female?" he asked.

"It's a she, sir. Her name is Coral," Harry answered.

Severus smirked. Really? Coral the magical coral snake. Right.

"Alright, browse the lizards over there. I'll get her."

Harry smiled and looked to the lizards as Severus motioned the store clerk over.

"Hello, professor, how may I help you?"

"I want that snake, right there. The little female coral snake."

"Yes, sir," he said, not questioning how Severus had known the snake was female.

Severus wondered if the man thought he was going to use the snake in a potion. Well, he'd let him think whatever he wished. Severus also purchased the supplies needed to care for Coral. Once that was done, he gave a nod to Harry to come.

Stepping aside and out of the line of sight from the people near, Severus vanished the box. Holding her gently, but right behind her head just in case, Severus waved his wand over her, casting the necessary protection charms.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter. Keep her with you always and out of sight if you can. People have an aversion to snakes, unfortunately."

Harry happily took her, letting her wrap around his left wrist and hiding her easily with his sleeve.

"Thank you, Professor. What sort of things did you cast on her?"

"A light protection charm, so if someone accidentally steps on her she won't be seriously hurt, and an intention charm. I trust you can tell her that she will only inject venom into what she bites if she truly desires to kill her target."

Harry nodded, briefly hissing into his sleeve to tell her.

"Very good. Let us retrieve the rest of your supplies."

They quickly got the rest of the needed supplies, though Severus insisted on Harry getting new casual clothing, shoes, and winter gear. They would be destroying his Dursley hand-me-downs as soon as possible. He also helped Harry choose a book that would assist him in caring for Coral and another that would begin helping him gain a superior control over his magic. Severus was confident Harry would be able to read them before school started, as well as the first few chapters of his schoolbooks — especially after he spoke to the Dursleys. Harry surprised him though when he pulled a small potions book out to also buy. It was an in-depth beginner's guide to understanding potion reactions and telling a potion's qualities.

"Well, I need to start somewhere, right?" Harry asked, seeing Severus' reaction and

hoping to gain his approval.

"You do."

"So, um, who teaches Potions? I hope they're not too hard, but I suppose they might have to be if potions can explode and stuff. You had said earlier cauldrons can melt?"

"Yes, they do, and too often because students don't know how to follow simple directions written on the board and printed in their books. I don't know how many times I've had to tell classes to stand on their chairs as a ruined potion spreads on the floor, threatening to eat away their toes."

Harry's eyes widened comically. "You're the Potions professor?"

"Yes, and I'll expect your potion grades to be E's and O's, so use that book well and read a chapter in your class book ahead of every lesson," Severus said sternly, wishing to impress upon him, yet again, the importance of his studies. He would not accept substandard work from the boy, especially since he knew his true potential. Harry would be challenged and, when absolutely necessary, nurtured from the get go. It was crucial.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered quickly, feeling a little dumb about not having realizing what Severus taught sooner.

"I'll give you that parselmagic book I mentioned before when I take you back to the Dursleys."

Harry nodded, approaching their next to last destination in Diagon Alley.

Going into Ollivander's, Severus went to one of the few racks and removed two items.

"You will be getting these. Wand holsters are important and every sensible witch or wizard uses them," Severus said.

"Alright, professor," Harry answered, before really looking around the shop.

"Good morning, Mr. Ollivander," Severus said, deciding to call out Ollivander before the man could begin his creepy introduction.

"Ah, Severus Snape. Oak, dragon heartstring, 12 inches. It has treated you well, I hope?"

"Yes," he said simply, his tone pointedly indicating that any further conversation was unwanted.

Ollivander looked to Harry, wisely heeding the unspoken message.

"I had wondered when I would be seeing you, Mr. Potter. It feels like only yesterday I was giving your mother and father their wands," he said, putting one of the narrow boxes away before coming to the side of the main desk of his store.

Severus leaned back against the wall as Ollivander chatted away about the wands of Harry's parents. He knew they were going to be in there for a while, so began mentally going through what things he needed to do once they were done in Diagon Alley.

"Nope, not that wand," Ollivander said for the fifth time.

Harry glanced nervously at Severus as wand after wand failed to be a good fit for him.

"It's fine, Mr. Potter; some wizards take longer than others," Severus reassured.

Harry nodded, though still looked a little uneasy as Ollivander disappeared into the back.

"And Mr. Potter, once you get a wand here, we will be going to the bank."

"Yes, sir."

Soon after, Harry finally did find his wand, the brother wand to Voldemort, just like last time — with red and gold sparks. Enduring Ollivander's tirade, they paid for the wand and the two holsters. Ollivander didn't ask about the second holster.

"That man's creepy," Harry said as they headed to the bank, his wand secured in his holster on his right arm.

"Quite."

Harry stepped a little closer to Severus when they entered the bank, Harry looking uneasily at the goblins about.

"These are goblins; they run the bank and financial system of the Wizarding World. Treat them with great respect and give them a brief bow before and after you speak to them. Never thank them, just say it was an honor to do business. You may elaborate on what was an honor, but do not brown nose."

Harry nodded, devoting everything he could to memory.

With the key, going to his vault was no problem. Once there, Harry was adamant about repaying Severus in full, and had even wanted to pay some interest (upon seeing he had plenty to spare), but Severus refused to take more than he had given. That done, Severus turned to the goblin escorting them.

"I suggest taking Mr. Potter to his main family vault. I have it on good authority there is an item he may retrieve before he becomes the Head of the Potter line."

"If you insist, sir," he stated flatly, though not rudely.

"I do."

"Very well, this way."

Harry looked at Severus as they followed the short goblin, but his attention was quickly taken by the opening of his main family vault.

"There should be a small, thin box etched with gold writing somewhere within. Go in and retrieve it, but touch nothing else," Severus said.

"Okay, sir. What's in it?" he asked, entering the vault while Severus and the goblin remained behind. They were not allowed to enter, as it was keyed to only allow Potter descendents.

"Your mother's wand. Unfortunately, your father's wand had not been able to be recovered from Godric's Hollow."

Hearing that, Harry doubled his efforts in finding the box.

"I found it!" he called, his form hidden behind a large pile of old boxes.

"Good, Mr. Potter. Now come on out with it."

Harry did so, carrying it with obvious reverence.

Severus gently removed the lid from the box. "Take it, Mr. Potter. It should be a very good secondary wand for you."

Harry slowly removed it, giving Severus the bottom half of the box as he did so.

An array of colored sparks burst forth from the end of the wand as his fingers

wrapped the handle, a bit different from the red and gold from the phoenix wand he had gotten from Ollivander's.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

"I want you to secure this to your right calf and put this wand there. Only use it in emergencies," Severus said, holding out the second holster they had purchased.

Harry knelt down and did so. "Do you think there are going to be emergencies?"

"It never hurts to be cautious, and wizards underestimate opponents they believe they have disarmed."

"Okay. Um, do you know what's in my mum's wand? Ollivander hadn't said the core, just said it was willow and good with charms."

"I don't, unfortunately. Ollivander didn't make your mother's wand. He just sold it to her. Whoever he got the wand from hadn't told him what it held in its core, or at least that is what your mother told me."

Harry bit his lip, before giving his mother's wand a soft pat and pulling his pant leg down to cover it.

"I want you to carry both of your wands at all times, even when you sleep. It is a good habit to have. I put on a few security charms on the holsters before I gave them to you. No one but you can remove them or retrieve your wands. The holsters are also waterproof, so be sure to wash them occasionally. Wands operate best when kept clean."

"Yes, sir."

"And if you want me to repeat anything I've told you today, simply say so. I know this is a lot of information to absorb."

Harry nodded, the vault door closing behind him.

"The rest of the things in there can only be retrieved when you're older. The vault wouldn't have closed otherwise," Severus said, before they went out of the bank and to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Are you going to take me back to the Dursley's now?" Harry asked as the brink wall sealed behind them and they swiftly left the pub before anyone could recognize Harry again.

"After we eat, yes," Severus said, now guiding them through muggle London and motioning to a small restaurant. "We skipped lunch, after all."

"Oh, I hadn't noticed," Harry said sheepishly.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You need to eat more. What you eat influences the strength of your magic."

"It does?" Harry looked a little worried, and Severus knew why.

Yet another thing he would need to rectify. Last time, Harry's poor diet (thanks to the Dursleys) had detrimentally affected his magic. Every summer, the lack of good, consistent meals prevented his core from developing to its fullest. The summer was an important time for magical children developmentally. It provided time for their core to rest and repair itself after the nine months of casting and learning, but this down time could only be effective if the body received proper nourishment to provide the means to repair. In the original timeline, Harry had not received this true rest, and his core had to cope with enduring year after year of training with no recovery time. It was like a body builder working out but only eating rice and a few carrots. Not going to work.

Had Harry had what he needed physically all year long during his Hogwarts years, the war might have gone differently. After all, vitamins and minerals not only enabled the body to use magic properly, but also aided in physical and mental development. Fortunately, Severus was certain he would be able to reverse the damage done so far and prevent future damage — whether the Dursleys liked it or not.

Severus placed a steady hand on Harry's thin shoulder. He wasn't exactly starving, but Severus would be surprised if he wasn't anemic. He doubted the Dursleys were concerned about Harry's intake of iron, probably never giving the boy much meat, not to mention a full meal.

They headed to a booth at the corner of the homey place, an elderly waitress pointing there with a kind smile. "I'll be just with you," she said, before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Harry, starting today, things are going to be different. You will have what you should have had all along, and you will never want for what you need again — not if I can help it." Severus pinched the cloth at Harry's shoulder, lifting it slightly with a disgusted sneer. "The Dursleys have a lot to answer for."

Harry's eyes widened and Severus internally grew uneasy as tears began to shine among brilliant green.

Realizing his eyes were filling with tears, Harry briskly wiped them away and looked down, his ears turning pink as he sat down at the table. Severus gave him a moment and was grateful Harry managed to collect himself before the waitress came over.

"What will it be?" the woman asked with a smile.

Severus answered first, stating he wanted dark, hot tea with one cube of sugar before suggesting to Harry to have chocolate milk. With a smile, Harry asked for just that.

A/N: Yes, another story. . . . I'm not sure how often I will be able to work on this one, but decided it would be interesting to play around with a few 'what-ifs', so . . . here it is. I hope you all enjoy it.

Also, Mysterious Thing, Time is still in the works, so it hasn't been abandoned, in case any of you were wondering.

Chats

Part 2: Chats

Walking beside Harry down the street in Surrey, Severus knew what happened next would greatly impact the future. He hoped he would not need to get too rough with the Dursleys . . . well, that was a lie. He hoped he would, but that there would be enough left over to keep the blood wards up, even if only barely.

Coming up to the front door, Harry looked anxious, and Severus couldn't blame him. Before ringing the door bell, Severus pulled Harry's shrunken school supplies from his inner robe pocket.

"Here are your things. To unshrink them, just tap your wand on them, but remember you cannot cast any spells outside of school."

"Yes, sir."

"When we go inside, I want you to go up to your room and wait for me there, and close the door. I want to have a private chat with your aunt and uncle." Severus' lip curled with disdain.

Maybe a single hex would be alright. Something small, something undetectable, even by normal wizards. The Flatulence Hex perhaps? That could last for months, and any gas medication would only make it worse. Or maybe he could be a bit more aggressive? It would be nothing more than they deserved.

"Sir?"

Severus looked down at Harry who had been watching him intently.

"Um, don't hurt them, okay? Please?"

It never ceased to amaze him how much of Lily was in Harry. Even after everything they had done, or rather had not done, he still did not want to see them hurt.

"I will try not to," he stated. He wasn't about to promise any more than that.

With that, Severus rang the door bell.

The door opened, revealing horse-faced Petunia.

"You!" she gasped, her face quickly contorting in rage.

"Yes — me," Severus replied smoothly, stepping forward and placing his foot firmly within the house so she could not shut the door.

She remained just beyond the doorway, glaring.

"Petunia, who is at the door?" Vernon asked from the other room.

"It's the boy and . . . one of *them*," she answered briskly.

Vernon stormed over soon after, his face growing red just behind Petunia's shoulder.

"Are you going to continue standing in the way, or are you going to let us in? You know, people can see us," Severus sneered, undeterred by Vernon's massive size and now purpling face. Harry shifted a little further behind Severus.

"Why should we? Your kind has been hounding us non-stop! First with owls, and then last night!" Vernon snarled. "The giant man who whisked the boy away last night broke down the door!"

"I doubt the door was all that sound to begin with," Severus replied.

"How dare you! Dudley has been scarred for life!"

"I'm sure. Now, are we going to stand here all day, becoming a spectacle for your neighbors, or are you going to let us in?"

Petunia huffed. "Fine." She stepped aside, letting them in, before quickly closing the door with a slam. "What do you want?" she asked nastily.

Vernon was glowering beside her, his hands clenched.

"Mr. Potter." Severus looked to the stairs.

"Yes, sir." Harry hurried up, not risking a look back, though he had seen Dudley hiding behind the couch.

Severus and the Dursleys heard the door close.

"I will not bother suggesting we sit, for I will make this quick. I understand your hatred for my world and may have been able to . . . sympathize with that, but right now the fact of the matter is — I don't, because I don't bloody care. From now on, you are going to treat Mr. Potter like a human being and not like an unwanted guest you hide in the basement or in . . . a cupboard." Severus glanced toward the little door under the stairs and glared. "I don't expect you to be kind, but simply

responsible adults. You can be responsible, can't you? You will give him full, balanced meals from now on, and will not lock him up anywhere — whether that be a cupboard or a room. And you will leave his things alone and in his room as well. You will also not have Mr. Potter doing more than three hours of chores a week — I suggest having him set the table and garden, that's fair. If I discover you are treating him as you have in the past, I have secret, untraceable ways to make your lives miserable. I promise."

Vernon was now shaking in rage, while Petunia was growing pale.

"Y-you have n-no right to say such things to us!" Vernon declared. "We have sheltered, clothed, and fed the boy for years now and have had to handle his unnaturalness!"

Severus raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "Out of the goodness of your hearts, of course."

"We were not given a choice! And then he went into that cupboard, of his own free will, soon after he came here! He would not go into the spare bedroom without wailing!" Petunia shrieked.

"Did you ever think of why, you daft woman? He had witnessed the murder of his mother in such a place, and that memory was still fresh! Of course he would take refuge in a small, secluded location. Any child would!"

Petunia inhaled sharply and even Vernon paused. Severus heard Dudley gasp from behind the couch.

"But then you turned his haven, which would have been temporary if you had bothered to help him, into a prison — placing locks on it for Merlin's sake! And you think my people are barbaric and medieval. Pathetic." Shaking his head, Severus took a few steps into the living room, pulling out his wand.

"Don't you begin doing any freakishness here!" Vernon bellowed.

Severus paid him no mind and flicked his wand toward the huddled figure behind the couch. "*Finite*."

Dudley gave a yelp, clutching his bottom and hopping out.

"Dudley!" Petunia cried, hurrying toward him as Vernon swung his meaty fist at Severus. Severus easily leaned out of the way.

"I-it's gone!" Dudley cried, his eyes wide with amazement. "It's not there anymore, t-

the tail!"

Vernon stumbled forward after over extending in attempt to hit Severus.

"Now that you have one less 'freakish' thing to deal with, you will promise to do as I said regarding Mr. Potter, otherwise I'll just put the tail back and carry through with *my promise*. Got it?" Severus asked, flaring his magic out from his center for emphasis.

"Fine-fine, we promise," Petunia said, fearfully. "Now get out!"

"Thank you. I will leave once I have spoken with Mr. Potter."

With that, Severus went up the stairs.

O o O o O

Severus opened the door to find Harry with a snow white owl and a short little letter. The boy's things were still tiny and had been set on the grubby little desk by the lumpy bed.

"Sir, she was in here when I came in, and look, Hagrid wrote to me!" Harry said, quite excited. "Look, he wrote she's a late birthday gift for me!"

Severus looked back to the owl, which he recognized as Hedwig. Harry followed his gaze, his excitement suddenly dimming.

"I can keep her, right?" he asked, though his eyes grew sad. He sighed. "The list only mentioned students having one pet. I can't have two, can I?" His voice was resigned.

Severus narrowed his eyes in thought. "I will speak with the Headmaster and explain the situation to him. Coral is the special case. If the Headmaster can see how much you need her and how helpful she will be to you, he might be willing to make an exception and allow you two pets. Exceptions have been made for students in the past, so you would not be the first."

Harry looked at him hopefully.

"But I am not promising anything. If he says no, there's nothing I can do, but rest assured, the owl will be taken care of. You may take care of her for the rest of the summer, but come September, you will have to accept whatever the Headmaster decides."

Harry nodded, used to disappointment but willing to hope. The owl gave a hoot.

"I do not want to encourage attachment, but she will need a name," Severus stated after a moment.

"I understand I might not be able to keep her, and she understands too," Harry said, looking to the owl. "Don't you?" The owl nodded. "See?"

"Indeed. Well, for name ideas, I suggest your history book we bought today."

"Okay, professor," Harry said, before looking at his bedroom door. "Um, how did the. . . ."

"Discussion go?" Severus finished with a smirk.

Harry nodded.

"As I had imagined," he answered. "They are unharmed and your cousin has been de-tailed."

Harry's eyes were twinkling in laughter. Severus was impressed with the boy's self control.

"I will send you the book on parselmagic soon, as well as a few potions I expect you to drink."

"Potions? What will they do?"

"They are potions for a nutrition plan I have set for you. When you read your potions school book, you will find two of the three I will be sending you."

"Why am I going to drink them, sir?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Must you really ask? How many boys your age are shorter than you? How many are stronger?"

Harry ducked his head in shame and embarrassment.

"It is of no fault of your own, Potter," Severus continued, back tracking a bit. He needed to remind himself to be honest, not utterly brutal.

"Has my magic been affected, like . . . with what you had said earlier? About the food?" Harry asked softly, dejected.

"No, but if things had been left alone, it would have. I expect you to eat your fill at meal times from now on, and if the Dursleys withhold food from you as they have clearly done in the past, I will know. And I will quickly rectify that situation, should it arise."

Harry blinked.

"The Dursleys know the consequences will be . . . unpleasant should they do anything I told them not to. I have given them fair warning." Severus shook his head. "It is disgraceful that they need such coercion to do what they should, but people are selfish, afraid, and prideful. As such, I ask if I may give you something."

"You've given me a lot already, professor," Harry said, amazed the professor was now *asking* to give him yet another thing, whatever it was.

"This does not only concern the Dursleys, Mr. Potter. It concerns anyone who would wish harm or ill-will upon you."

Harry frowned. He was not sure he liked where this conversation was going.

"What are you talking about, sir?"

"How much did Hagrid tell you about the Dark Lord?"

"Well, he said he was very bad. Had gathered followers and stuff, killed those who stood against him. He told me about . . . that Halloween night." Harry touched his forehead, his fingers brushing across his scar. Harry closed his eyes, before reopening them and looking up at Severus. "But that was pretty much it. Is there something he left out? He wasn't really forthcoming. I had to talk him into telling me as much as he had."

"The Dark Lord is not dead." Severus decided to just get to the point, as it seemed Harry was ready for it — might even appreciate it.

"Hagrid doesn't think so either."

"I don't simply think he is not dead. I know he is not."

Harry swallowed, quickly realizing the implications of the professor's words.

"I am not telling you this to frighten you, but to prepare you, for there are people in the Wizarding World who want *him* back and *you* gone."

Harry frowned, his brow creased. "Like Lucius Malfoy? Is that why you didn't want

him to see me?"

"Yes."

Harry tilted his head, still thinking. "But, what could he have done then? I mean, you were there and other people. Would he have done something in broad daylight?"

"I did not want him to see you with me. I am his son's godfather. It would have complicated matters."

Severus could tell Harry's mind was digesting what he was saying, trying to figure out what implications it had and what else was behind it. Good. He wanted Harry to use his head and get into the habit of figuring things out. Things underneath the first discovered reason or cause. It would also help make things easier for him later if Harry ever did learn the whole truth.

"Okay, professor. What did you want to give me?" Harry asked, a little uncertainly.

"This," he answered, holding out a simple, silver chain necklace.

"What is it, sir? I mean, does it do anything?"

Severus gave a small smile. The boy was learning quickly.

"It will alert me if you are in danger and notify me of your location should such a situation arise."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's a good idea," Harry said, taking the necklace. "Um, I assume this will be just like the holsters?"

"Yes, keep it on all the time. You are also the only person who can remove it, or lift it even, once you have it latched."

"Lift it?"

"You wouldn't want someone to choke you with it, would you?"

Harry quickly shook his head no, recalling how often Dudley pulled the back of his shirt when he managed to catch him and how hard it was to breathe when the cloth of his shirt pulled taut against his throat. He'd rather be kicked by Dudley than have his shirt pulled like that again, but he would rather Dudley grab his shirt than Uncle Vernon. Harry unconsciously put his little hand to his throat, gently touching his pale skin. Severus' eyes narrowed a bit, but didn't say anything about it.

"Remember you cannot do magic outside of school, unless your life is in danger, but that doesn't mean you can't read about it," Severus said, deciding the conversation needed to move onto less troubling things.

"Yes, sir. I will read everything I can."

"Very good. It would also be beneficial for you to practice using your quill. After you have read a chapter, summarize it on parchment. I find that muggleborn students, or students from the muggle world, have a hard time writing well initially. Which is unfortunate for them, as I count off for chicken scratch and ink covered assignments. If you want to show me you deserve an E or an O, or even an A, I have to actually be able to *read* your writing."

"I understand, sir, but . . ." Harry paused, organizing his thoughts. "I don't know the grading scale. I should have asked earlier, sorry."

"You are forgiven, Mr. Potter," he answered lightly. "The scale, from lowest to highest, is: T-Troll, D-Dreadful, P-Poor, A-Acceptable, E-Exceeds Expectations, and O-Outstanding."

Harry nodded as Severus glanced around the little room again. It would be a Spartan existence for Harry before school started, but it was better than the cupboard life he had just left. Severus thought about casting a few charms to improve the items in the room, but he settled for a more practical route.

Waving his wand about, the potions master silently cast *reparo*. He was quickly rewarded by an amazed gasp from Harry as the rickety old bed leveled out, the desk regained its original finish, the leg of the desk chair straightened, and a few other smaller things repaired themselves. The room was still bleak, but it was no longer pathetic.

"Wow, thanks professor!" Harry exclaimed. "That was the most wicked thing I've ever seen!"

"You're gushing again, Mr. Potter," he warned, though the faint smile softened the harshness in his voice. "But you're welcome."

Harry smiled sheepishly.

"Do you have any other questions before I leave?" Severus asked as he pulled out the train ticket and handed it to him.

"Where is this platform nine and three-quarters?" Harry asked, reading the elaborate

ticket and tilting his head at the three-quarters bit.

"It is beyond the barrier between platforms nine and ten. When you get to King's Cross railway station, you simply walk into the wall between nine and ten. The wall is an illusion, so simply walk through it. It will take you to Hogwarts Express."

"Okay," Harry said, trying not to sound disbelieving.

"Go early so you can get a good seat and avoid the crowds."

"Yes, sir." Harry straightened his back some, standing a little taller. He had no further questions and was letting the professor know he could leave. "Thank you, Professor," he sincerely thanked.

Severus gave a brief nod, acknowledging his thanks and respectful dismissal. "I will see you on September 1st, Mr. Potter. Expect the parselmagic book and those potions in a few hours. If you have any concerns with anything, send a letter with your owl to me. She'll find me."

Harry nodded, feeling a little uncertain with what he should do now that the professor was leaving. Should he walk him to the front door?

"I will walk myself out. I don't believe your aunt and uncle will mind you staying up here until dinner," he said.

"Alright, sir. Good bye, and thanks again."

Severus waved off his thanks as he stepped out from the room. "Until September, Mr. Potter." With that, he shut the bedroom door and headed back down to the Dursleys.

After a quick statement to Vernon, informing him he would take Harry to King's Cross station on September 1st whenever Harry said he wished to leave, the dark robed potions master finally headed out — to the relief of the Dursleys.

O o O o O

Severus knew there would be repercussions he would have to face for going to Diagon Alley and involving himself with Harry as he had. So when a house elf popped before him the moment he flooed into his quarters from Hogsmeade, he had not been surprised.

"Master Severus Snape sir, Headmaster Dumbledore sir asks for yous to report to

his office."

"Of course," he answered silkily. "I will arrive in a moment."

With a bow, the Hogwarts elf popped away.

Severus hurried to his potions shelf and pulled the nutrient potions for Harry before summoning the parselmagic book he had promised him.

"Mittens," he called softly.

-Pop-

"Yes, master?" she asked as Severus jotted down a note.

Mittens was a tiny house elf who had, for whatever reason, attached herself to Severus. She had been a Hogwarts elf, but soon after Severus had become a professor, she decided to serve him and become his personal elf.

"Put these items in a box and attach the note to it. Then take the package to Fury and have him deliver it to Harry Potter in Surrey," he said, handing her the items.

Fury was his northern hawk owl that lived in the owlery, as the dungeons were no place for an owl.

"Yes, Master," she said with a bounce. It wasn't everyday Severus had a task for her, as he was not prone to asking others to do things he could do himself. "It will be done just as Master says."

"Thank you, Mittens."

She bowed and popped away.

Severus straightened and turned toward the fireplace, preparing himself mentally for what he was about to endure.

The last time he had seen Dumbledore . . . alive. . . .

Severus shook himself. He could not allow himself to dwell on the past. It had not happened in this timeline — it **would not** happen.

But Severus could not stop his mind from thinking back, scenes of that day flashing violently in his mind's eye. He had to fight the bile from rising up his throat. No one should die that way, least of all a leader like Albus.

Exhaling slowly, he occluded, reigning in the calm and solidifying his mental walls as he buried the painful, horrid memories. Events would not repeat themselves; he would die before he would allow it.

Confident he had himself under control, he took a handful of floo powder and stepped into the fireplace, disappearing in a flare of green flame.

O o O

He stepped into the eccentric office, the entire atmosphere almost foreign to him now. It had been over two years since he had been here and seen this office whole.

He looked to the desk, finding the Headmaster signing some documents.

"You wanted to see me, Headmaster?" he asked, softly announcing his presence — even though he knew very well that Albus was already aware of his arrival.

"Ah, Severus! Yes, please, sit down." He looked up, gazing over his half-moon spectacles. His eyes were as kind as ever, but there was also something else. Bemusement?

The potions master did as asked, sitting as he often had before. Straight-backed and stiff.

Putting aside a stack of papers, Albus held out the bowl of sweets. "Lemon Drop?"

Severus was very tempted to take one, but it would be so out of character that it might cause Albus to have a stroke. He politely declined.

Acting disappointed, the headmaster set the bowl back down after taking a candy himself.

"Well, I had an interesting conversation with Hagrid a few hours ago," the older, much older, man began.

"I can imagine," Severus said tersely.

"I am curious, Severus, why you went to Diagon Alley," he continued, unbothered by the younger professor's curtness.

Severus didn't reply immediately, thinking about how best to handle this. He couldn't tell Albus the truth, that was for sure. He would begin asking too many questions and it would complicate things that were best left alone for Severus to handle on his own.

"I was . . . curious," he answered finally.

"About Harry?" Albus' eyes gave a slight twinkle.

"Yes."

"So you went to see him for yourself? But why did you decide to relieve Hagrid and take Harry to get his supplies yourself? Were you so curious to spend an entire day with the boy?"

Severus knew he had to tread carefully. He had to make this believable. Very believable.

"At first, I simply wanted to determine the boy's attitude and then be on my way, but upon seeing his physical condition and attire. . . ." Severus' tone grew dark and dangerous.

Albus quickly leaned forward, his eyes growing concerned. "Please, continue, Severus."

"The boy is underweight and was clothed in ragged old clothes that were at least three sizes too big for him."

The Headmaster's eyes widened.

"I felt it best for me to take over and ensure things were not worse than I had already been able to gather."

"What did you learn?" Albus asked, afraid to hear the answer but needing to know.

"Enough to have already sent the boy several potions," Severus sneered. "I will be sending him three potions every week for him to drink."

Albus exhaled slowly, his wrinkles becoming more pronounced as he frowned. "How bad is it?"

"Nothing that I cannot repair, but, had things been left alone, next year at this time I wouldn't have been able to say the same."

Albus closed his eyes in emotional pain as guilt, stronger than a furious Hungarian Horntail, rose up within him. He should have listened to Minerva, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

"I have already had a . . . discussion with the Dursleys. Their mistreatment of him will

not continue. Mr. Potter will be eating full meals and sleeping in a real bed from now on."

"A real bed?" the Headmaster asked in alarm, his eyes snapping open as another emotion swelled from his center.

Outrage.

Unfortunately, Severus did not comprehend the extent of anger now glistening in the older man's eyes, and promptly answered. "Oh yes, Mr. Potter has been sleeping in a cupboard for the last ten years. The Dursleys had moved him into the spare bedroom after the first letter," he stated flatly, having to control his own disgust until it was instantly forgotten in the next split second.

Magic erupted, and it was only thanks to a century of using magic that prevented all of the Headmaster's things from shattering spectacularly off his desk and shelves. As it was, his self control was not good enough and the bookshelf directly behind him exploded, pages now fluttering all around him in a mighty and intimidating display of his old power.

Albus leaned forward, his head bowed as he reigned in his magic — magic that was still rippling through the air and causing his hair and clothing to shift in a pulsating breeze. His left hand was flat on the desk, while his right was clenched into a tight fist at the center of his chest. Fawkes gave a concerned squawk and quickly flew to him, landing on his left shoulder before lowering his feathered head and lovingly burying his beak into the man's white hair.

Severus was speechless.

He had never seen his mentor so . . . furious.

Student letters were addressed automatically, and it was only after Harry had not replied to his first letter that McGonagall looked at what was being written. The first letter she saw was addressed: 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive.' She had not known about the cupboard, so had not been able to tell the Headmaster.

In Severus' future, the Headmaster had known things were not good in the Dursley household, but had not known the extent of it. He had been suspicious, but by that time the war was in full motion and there was nothing he could really do.

"How is Harry?" the old wizard whispered as he stilled his magic, papers now settling down around them.

"Mentally?" Severus asked softly, a little nervous about causing another bout of accidental magic from the old man. His mentor had yet to look back up, but gave a stiff nod, prompting him to answer. "Sound and strong as far as I could tell."

"You are . . . pleased with what you found," Albus commented, his shoulders relaxing a little but his voice revealed surprise as he rose his face. Fawkes straightened a little, but remained on his human's shoulder.

Severus didn't deny the statement, but moved on, deciding to quickly move away from Harry's treatment at the Dursleys. He did not like seeing an enraged Dumbledore.

"I found that the boy is a parselmouth," he said calmly.

That bit of news last time had not stunned the old man, why should it now?

"*What*?"

Had the situation been different, he may have smirked at the flabbergasted Headmaster, but he could find no amusement just then, for he spotted a flicker of fear in the normally twinkling blue eyes.

In that instant, Severus knew he had to shift his approach, and as abruptly as he could. Apparently, curving away from the abuse of the boy-who-lived as he had had not been a good idea.

He lifted his hand in attempt to calm his mentor, pitch black eyes locking onto blue, trying to convey to him that it was not what he was envisioning. Harry was not a monster.

"I have gotten him interested in parselmagic and I am sure he is already pouring over the book I have sent him."

"Parselmagic? Does he . . . does he know what it entails?" Albus asked, clearly looking for a sign that Harry was not another Riddle.

"He knows its purpose — healing and protection. He was quite intrigued and is hopeful his learning it will ease people's fears of the gift. He is . . . like Lily," he admitted softly.

The Headmaster calmed, his eyes twinkling once again, this time with relief and joy.

"Which brings me to a little problem that has arisen," Severus continued, his tone

telling Albus that it was not urgent as he brushed a tiny puff of cloth from his black sleeve.

"Oh?" He shifted forward in his seat, ignoring the obliterated pieces of book and paper on and around him.

"Yes. I gave permission for him to have an exotic pet — a small, magical coral snake."

"For parselmagic?"

"Yes, but I had not anticipated Hagrid also getting a pet for the boy."

Well, he had, but he didn't have to tell Dumbledore that.

"Ah."

"I have told him he may not be able to keep the owl Hagrid has given him, due to school rules, but that I would bring the issue to you. He is prepared for whatever you decide."

"Well, I see no harm in making an exception for Mr. Potter, as long as he agrees to learn parselmagic. If the Board learns of the exception that has been made for him, they will want a very good reason for it to be allowed. I can think of no better reason than a young wizard learning a benevolent form of rare magic."

"Those were my thoughts," Severus agreed.

"I am proud of you, Severus," the old man said suddenly, peering intently at him. "From your previous comments about Harry this summer, I had been . . . concerned you would not treat. . . ." He cut himself off and sighed, as if ashamed of himself for not having faith in his spy.

Severus looked down, now quite ashamed of his earlier behavior concerning James' son, knowing Albus had had very good reason for being concerned. Last time he had acted very foolishly. His anger at James had outweighed his love for Lily for a long time, until it had been overpowered by the reality that Harry was not his father — or his mother. He was their son, yes, but he was his own person, and although he had many personality traits that reminded Severus of Lily, the boy was inexplicably one of the strongest and wisest warriors Severus had ever had the honor of fighting alongside. He had grown to become his brother in arms . . . and, dare he say it, a friend.

The headmaster swallowed thickly. "What you have told me today . . . I know it could not have been easy to learn it firsthand. I . . . applaud your self control. I cannot say I would have been able to handle it as honorably."

"It . . . was a close thing, Headmaster. And actually, it was Mr. Potter himself that prevented me from hexing his aunt and uncle to oblivion."

"Oh? How so?"

"He asked me not to hurt them. He even said please."

The old wizard's eyebrows rose, his eyes moist. "Remarkable," he whispered.

They fell into a comfortable, albeit odd, silence.

"Severus?" Albus asked after a moment.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"What are your thoughts on the boy for this coming term? Really?" Albus asked, his sad eyes telling Severus he should be completely honest with this answer.

"He has . . ." Severus brought his hands together, a touch of a smile on his lips. ". . . Great potential."

O o O o O

A/N: I was not only surprised by the number of reviews, but how many people were concerned about Hedwig :P. I'm glad I'm not the only one who was seriously saddened by her fate in canon. Man, what a way to go O.O ...

Anyway, I hope I kept true to Snape's personality. It was fun writing the scene with the Dursleys, even though it was a little difficult at times.

Also, like my other fics, I'm not going to do any heavy Dumbledore bashing. I think it has gotten a bit old, to be honest, and I like a good, but human, grandfatherly Dumbledore.

Thanks for the reviews, they've really helped to keep the muse going. Next part is in the works.

Tasks

Part 3: Tasks

Severus stepped into the Room of Requirement, wand in hand. Today, there would be no more vanishing cabinet. Hogwarts would not fall from within. If the Dark Lord was going to conquer her, he would have to do it the hard way.

He closed his eyes and exhaled.

A hundred death eaters had stormed Hogwarts, pouring from this passage. They had killed every student that they had come upon. Sixty-seven students had been murdered that day, and Filius had fallen as well.

Well, it would not happen this time.

He reopened his eyes, focused on the task at hand as scenes of that day replayed through his mind.

It was the end of Harry's sixth year — the beginning of the end.

Screams echoed down the halls, children running, terrified as spells shot overhead. Filius Flitwick dashed forward, weaving around students to intercept the invaders. Rushing after him, Severus turned the corner and saw the short dueling master dishing out merciless magic. Four death eaters were already lying before him, broken.

Severus aimed his wand at the cabinet, his dark eyes taking in its grand etchings along the trim.

"Filius!" he bellowed, throwing spells of his own, trying to help the Charms Professor keep the death eaters back to buy more time.

Severus' cover had been blown minutes before.

"Aim for the walls!" Filius shouted, sending a massive blasting hex at the wall a few feet up and to his left.

Understanding his plan, Severus sent five more similar spells at the walls and ceiling near where Filius had sent the first spell, but not soon enough.

The older professor blocked two of the curses sent at him, and dodged four others, but he could not avoid or deflect them all. A -diffindo- passed through his defenses

and caught him across his neck and chest. There was a spray of red.

The last thing Severus saw of Filius was his slashed form crumple forward, before the stone and rock from the ceiling and walls buried him.

Releasing his anger, fire poured from his wand, red hot flames erupting into the air before rocketing toward the tall black cabinet and consuming it with a vengeance of god-like proportions.

The hall was now blocked, but a rumble from the other side of the rubble told Severus that the death eaters were still coming.

The tongues of flame curved about, Severus pulling his wand back before he thrust it forward again and down sharply, releasing his rage onto the now burning cabinet.

He made it past the Great Hall, bodies of students and death eaters alike all about.

He yelled out, his magic weaving the roaring fire as his mind continued to replay that day.

Dumbledore finally arrived, the attack at the Ministry having postponed his coming.

"Severus! This way!" he directed, just as the wall behind Severus exploded out, sending him head over heels across the chamber.

Fighting to get up, Severus turned to see his former Lord standing at the threshold. Albus stepped forward, moving between his injured spy and Voldemort.

"Tom."

"Do not call me by that name!" the Dark Lord hissed, whipping his wand about, a demonic shadow-fire rising up before them.

"Get out, Severus!" Albus ordered as he batted the growing fire monster aside with a pulse of his white magic.

Severus moved to do as he was told, glancing back to see Albus curving the dark flames up and away to lick the ceiling, trying to rip the control of the flames away from Riddle.

BOOM!

His vision went black.

Sweat on his brow, he bent his knees and emptied his lungs in one sudden breath.

He woke up in a makeshift hospital a few days later. He learned from Albus that Hogwarts had been completely destroyed. Leveled. Into the ground.

The flames collapsed, condensing into a tiny defiant thing, before that too snuffed out, leaving the ash of the cabinet behind.

Severus smiled.

He would be able to sleep in peace tonight.

O o O o O

Harry frowned at the stubborn quill that would not obey his commands. It was as if it was determined to leave blobs of ink all over the parchment no matter what he did. He sighed, recalling what Professor Snape had said — 'students from the muggle world have a hard time writing well initially.'

Well, at least all of this practice would save him from getting P's later, or worse. And summarizing what he had read as he practiced was ingenious really. Professor Snape was really nice to give him a task that helped him learn two things at the same time.

He had read three chapters into all of his books so far. It was the beginning of the second week of August and he knew he would be grateful for all of the work he was putting in once he got to school.

He liked the extra potions book a lot. It was called, 'The Beginner's Guide to the Art of Brewing: Ingredients'. It reminded him of a cook book, but more specific in what ingredients did what to bring about the finished product. He wondered if he might be able to incorporate cooking and brewing together to make a meal of epic proportions. He would have to remember to ask Professor Snape later.

The other two books he had gotten from the store with the professor were also proving to be rather helpful — 'Caring for Serpents' and 'Controlling Your Inner Magic'. Coral laughed at some of the things in the serpent book, finding it hilarious that humans went to such trouble to do things they believed snakes liked, when they really didn't care either way. Harry was glad he could just ask Coral what she wanted, instead of having to guess. The other book was a little less straightforward and clear, but at least now he knew why his accidental magic surfaced in some instances and not in others. Maybe he could teach himself to call up his 'accidental' magic and get it to do things he wanted, when he wanted. Yet another thing he

decided to ask Professor Snape when he got to Hogwarts.

As for his other school books, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts looked the most interesting, and although Transfiguration looked pretty cool, he was not looking forward to transfiguring animals. It seemed so cruel. Though, that may be because he knew how it felt to be treated like an object.

But his most favorite book, by far, was 'The Art of Parsel'. It was amazing, and he couldn't wait to begin trying things with Coral, and neither could she. The book was written by a man whose friend was a parselmouth. It didn't have parsel spells exactly, just what his friend had told him about how he did certain things, how it felt, and what limits he had found concerning certain methods.

The book was a nice read for those curious about parselmagic and a guide to those teaching it to themselves. From what Harry had been able to gather thus far was that he had to say what he wanted done in parseltongue while manipulating his magic or the patient's. For example, if he wanted a patient's shattered arm to heal, he would say, :Shattered bone, repair:, and it would be done (as long as he provided enough magic in the area needing to be healed).

Reading the book, Harry learned that once he got the basics of parselmagic, he would be able to heal people without even using a wand! All he'd need would be his hands and Coral around his wrist. He would, eventually, even be able to heal sicknesses of all kinds, even things normally untreatable by magic and potions. He wondered if he would be able to volunteer sometimes in the nurse's office, if the school had a nurse. Though, why wouldn't it?

-Tap-taptap-

Harry looked up and saw the hawk owl on the other side of the window before quickly opening it up for him to come in. Hedwig straightened.

He removed the package, quickly knowing what it was. It was that week's dose of potions. He waved the hawk owl over to drink from Hedwig's bowl. She didn't fuss, in fact, she helped preen his feathers. Harry hid a grin. He was certain Hedwig liked the handsome hawk owl.

Shaking his head, he turned to the package and opened it. Upon doing so, he immediately chugged the first potion, before quickly following it with the other two, despite their horrid taste. He did this because of what the professor had told him in his first letter on August 1st . . . .

Mr. Potter,

Enclosed in the box are the three potions I promised and the parselmagic book: The Art of Parsel.

Concerning the potions, you will always drink the red flask first. It will enable your body to more effectively take in nourishment from the food you eat and the potions you drink. It is called the Absorbance Potion. It is referenced in the fourteenth chapter of your potions book.

*The blue flask you will drink next, **immediately** after the red. It is a variant of the Draught of Nourishment, which is in chapter nineteen. Note it is not the same as the Nutrient Potion.*

The third is a potion I call the Utilization Potion. It will allow your magic to flow within your body more efficiently. This will decrease your recovery time and primarily assist in muscle growth.

*Expect these three potions every week and **DRINK** them as soon as they arrive! I have a stasis spell on the flasks but once you touch them the spell is off. The fresher the potion the more it will help you. Ignore the taste as best you can. The benefits far outweigh the aftertaste.*

Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master

Harry smiled as he felt the effects of the potions once again.

They gave him a very nice full feeling, a feeling he was quickly learning was what one felt when they ate what they needed at a meal. Harry decided it was one of the nicest feelings one could ever feel, even with the nasty coating left over on his tongue.

Setting the package aside, he removed the little note attached to the top of it. Once again, he saw the writing of his professor.

Mr. Potter,

I trust you have already drunk the three potions. If you haven't, DRINK THEM NOW. I also trust the Dursleys are behaving themselves, as I have not been alerted to their failings.

Continue reading your books and writing with a quill. I do not like slackers.

Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master

Harry smiled, finding it oddly comforting the professor was taking the time to tell him to keep working.

Looking back at his desk, the hawk owl still enjoying Hedwig's affections, he decided to try and reply.

Dear Professor Snape,

I have taken the potions you've sent me. Thank you.

The Dursleys have been leaving me alone. It's been nice. I've been able to read a lot because I haven't been told to clean the house, cook meals, or anything!

Well, I am going to get back to reading The Art of Parsel. It's awesome! Thanks for letting me read it. I am going to learn all I can and work very hard like you said I should. I want the lock you said I have to lift.

Thanks for everything! (Sorry, trying not to gush.)

Harry Potter

Harry bit his lip as he read over his letter. His writing wasn't as bad as it was last week; however, he got the feeling the professor would not appreciate how some of the letters were erratically thicker than others, but it was the best he could do right now. Knowing it would have to do, Harry folded the letter and turned to the hawk owl.

"Could you take this to Professor Snape, please?" he asked.

He got an affirmative hoot before the hawk owl took the letter and flew out the window.

:Are you going to read now, Harry?: Coral asked, lifting her colorful head from his wrist.

:Yeah. I should be able to read the next chapter before lunch:

Coral hissed in agreement.

O o O o O

Severus looked at the progress of the Utilization Potion he was brewing for Harry. Stirring it, he let his mind wander.

What should he do with his free time? What could he do to help prepare for the

upcoming war, besides what he was already doing? Perhaps he could subtly suggest some things to Albus? Yes, that might work. But what to do exactly? There was the matter of Sirius Black. Should he open that big can of worms? Should he find Remus Lupin first?

He really didn't know.

To be brutally honest, Black had not been very helpful in the future, and Severus was not quite sure he would be any more helpful if he got him out of the prison two years early. If anything, it may hurt the work he is trying to do with Harry. Granted, leaving an innocent man in Azkaban is a rotten thing to do. He would need to think more on what to do with Black.

Lupin, on the other hand, had been a bit more, well, useful. Maybe he could get him involved with Harry's life sooner, providing the boy with another adult he could count on, and then just let Lupin recognize the rat. That way, he would be out of that mess when it hit the fan and could watch from the sidelines. But . . . was that really the best option? Was it wise to let the rat remain that close to Harry for any amount of time? Allow him to possibly gather intelligence on Harry to give to Voldemort?

Hmm, when he thought of it that way . . . he couldn't allow Peter Pettigrew to remain as Ronald Weasley's pet rat.

He stopped stirring, waiting for the proteins to react as he thought about what to do about Pettigrew.

Shaking his head and deciding he would need to think more on it later as well, he admitted to himself he had a more serious problem on his hands.

Quirrell.

He would be returning to the castle in a few weeks, so he only had so much time to prepare for him and subtly prepare the Headmaster and the rest of the staff.

He knew he wouldn't be able to get rid of him. Voldemort was too good at hiding in plain sight, and even though Dumbledore might suspect him (as he had originally, later in the term), he would still keep him around just to keep an eye on him.

Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. . . . It was a good philosophy.

O o O o O

Severus sat down in the headmaster's office. The Heads of House were about to

have the annual meeting with the headmaster concerning the upcoming school year.

"Severus, how are you? I haven't seen you for a few days," Filius squeaked cheerfully. "Been brewing potions?"

"I am doing fine, and yes, I have been brewing," he answered simply.

"I am looking forward to the students coming. This place is too quiet without them," Filius continued.

"Hmm," Severus hummed, a faint sarcasm underneath.

"Oh, come now, Severus, even you must be finding the dungeons a bit too quiet now," Minerva said, joining in.

"Not really."

Minerva narrowed her eyes. "Well, I am certainly looking forward to the students returning. I am also looking forward to seeing the new students." She gave a soft smile, her eyes dancing with anticipation. "It should be an interesting year."

Severus didn't answer for a long moment, but then whispered, "Perhaps."

"And I am sure Mr. Wood is going to be a great Quidditch Captain. This year Slytherin will not stand a chance!" Minerva said, getting pumped.

Severus fought the urge to roll his eyes.

Had they really been that competitive? Had there been this strong of a rivalry that he would have immediately countered that statement with a childish phrase like, 'Will not! Slytherin will beat your house!'

If he was honest with himself, that answer was yes.

But the war had changed him. He no longer cared about Quidditch, and now that he thought about it, he didn't even know why he ever gave so much attention to it before. Sure, he would always support his Slytherins, but to be so zealous as to give Minerva a run for her money in obsession. . . .

It was just sad.

How much had their competitiveness added to the friction between their houses? How much could have been different if they had shifted their love of quidditch to more long lasting endeavors - like say . . . the welfare and future of their students?

Severus shook his head. "Oh, I'm sure they will have a chance, just the same as Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw."

Minerva and Pomona Sprout glanced at each other, raising their eyebrows. Flitwick almost fell off his chair. They had been expecting a retort of some kind, not a deflection and a conversation closer.

"Good morning!" Albus greeted, entering the office from his private quarters.

The professors respectfully returned the greeting as he got behind his desk.

"So, anything anyone wants to discuss first? We have a great deal to cover," Albus began.

"Madam Hooch has asked for funds to purchase new brooms for her classes," Minerva answered.

Albus looked apologetic. "I will send the request to the Board, but I sincerely doubt that will make it into the budget this year."

Minerva sighed. "Repeat of last year then."

"I'm afraid so," he agreed, before looking to one of the other professors to invite them to voice any concerns of theirs.

Flitwick spoke up, asking about what was going on with the stone, since Hagrid had recently delivered it to the school. This led them to discussing protections and how they would need to begin placing them soon. The third floor was brought up, because it was an older part of the castle that students didn't frequent often. Severus saw an opportunity here and took it.

"Why place it so far from where we will normally be?" Severus asked. "If you ask me, the safest place would be here, in your tower, Headmaster."

Filius hummed at that, his brain calculating the warrants of such a maneuver. They knew Voldemort was after the stone, the break in at Gringotts had told them that much. Was the safest place for it in the Headmaster's office? Or even . . . in his quarters?

"That is . . . an interesting suggestion, Severus," Albus admitted. "I don't know why I hadn't thought of that."

Severus shrugged, unbothered by the curious looks he was getting.

"If the Dark Lord is able to enter Hogwarts, which I am sure we all know he is capable if he is determined enough — and he is, then it seems only sensible to me to place the stone in an area he would avoid entering," Severus continued, before getting a thoughtful look on his face. "And, to make this even better, why not have the third floor be a decoy? We can go through with placing all these fancy protections there and tell the other professors the stone is there to make it even more convincing. No one else but the five of us has to know where the real stone is. This way, it is safer for everyone. I also strongly suggest placing an age-line at the entrance of the third floor, so no students are at risk of placing themselves in danger anymore than they normally are."

There was a minute of silence as the others contemplated his suggestion before the headmaster broke it.

"Excellent plan, Severus. Anyone have anything to add?" Albus asked.

"What will the real protections be?" Filius asked.

"Well, I will certainly put up a few more wards around my quarters and this office," Albus stated.

Pomona Sprout nodded, before asking, "Why not the ultimate protection? Why not use the Fidelius?"

Severus almost wanted to kiss the woman. He had mentally been wanting to suggest that, but he had spoken enough, and (with his past concerning the Potters), if he brought up anything even minutely related to Lily, he knew such an idea from him would really have caused the Headmaster and the others to raise their eyebrows at him.

Upon hearing Pomona's suggestion, the Headmaster's eyes twinkled. "I will have to run it by Nicholas, but I am sure he will have no qualms about it."

Pomona beamed.

"Alright, I believe we should move the topic onto the new incoming students," Albus continued. "Thirty-eight children have accepted their invitations. Four politely declined due to previous education arrangements and the like."

The professors nodded, having heard it plenty of times before. Not everyone felt Hogwarts was the best for their children, and it was within their right.

"Well, I am sure you all know that this year Harry Potter will be returning to the

Wizarding World," Albus began.

"I understand he was having trouble getting his letter at first?" Filius asked. "What was the problem there?"

The headmaster's eyes saddened. "I grievously misjudged the situation."

"Situation, Albus?" Minerva asked.

"I am sorry, Minerva. I should have listened to you all those years ago," Albus said softly.

Minerva's eyes widened, before her Scottish temper began to radiate from her form. Pomona and Flitwick glanced at each other. What was going on?

"Albus, what did they do?" she questioned, her voice dangerously low.

Severus decided to take pity on his mentor and spoke up. "The situation has been handled. Mr. Potter has all that he will need when he arrives. Let us move on."

That caused everyone to look at the potions professor.

"It's been handled, Severus?" Minerva asked, confused. "And how do you know Mr. Potter is ready for September first?"

"I helped him get his things."

Filius blinked, Minerva raised an eyebrow, and Pomona glanced at Albus.

"But I thought Hagrid took him to Diagon Alley," Filius said.

"He did, but I took over from there." Severus looked back at his mentor, not sure how much he should say. He didn't want to make it even harder for them to treat Harry like a normal student.

"B-bu-what?" Minerva stuttered.

"What is he like?" Filius asked eagerly, unconcerned with McGonagall's state. "Is he like his parents?"

"He is . . . a bit." Severus didn't want to comment further. He would let them make their own conclusions once they met him.

"Really? Oh, I do hope he likes Charms," the Charms professor chimed.

"He has shown interest in potions and—" Severus began, only to be cut off.

"Well, that's not much of a surprise, you likely steered him that way," Minerva said.

"I merely told him his mother had a talent in it, so he may have some as well."

"A compliment, Severus?" she asked, stunned.

"The boy has . . . potential," he stated.

"I am sure he does, but what could you determine in one day with him?" she questioned, bewildered by Severus' new attitude but not wanting to reveal that fact.

"A great deal."

"Ah, which reminds me," Albus said, interrupting. "Severus gave Mr. Potter permission to have an exotic pet; however, Hagrid hadn't known that when he sent Mr. Potter an owl for a late birthday gift. Because of this, I have made an exception for him, allowing him to have both."

"Both? Two pets?" Minerva asked, her voice elevating slightly.

"An exotic pet?" Filius squeaked.

"What was the exotic pet?" Pomona asked.

Severus braced himself for the coming reaction.

"Oh, a magical coral snake," Albus replied calmly, as if the pet was a fluffy bunny instead of a poisonous serpent.

"*What*?" Minerva cried, before sending a glare at Severus, believing he was trying to convert Harry Potter into a Slytherin.

"Don't glare at me. I determined it was the sensible thing to do when I learned he was a parselmouth and showed great interest in parselmagic when I brought it up."

"A-a parselmouth?" Filius gasped, his voice so high it couldn't even be called a squeak — it was a wheeze.

"How is this possible, Albus?" Minerva asked, looking to her old friend.

"It is from the killing curse. However it had happened, some of Voldemort's power went into the boy," he answered.

Severus kept the truth to himself. He would let them think this was true for now. It wasn't important enough for them to know he had cast the Legacy Spell on Harry. That would make things overly complicated.

"Oh my," Filius whispered.

"So he is interested in parselmagic?" Pomona asked, her voice soft and happy. She knew the power in such magic, and for the Potter child to be a wielder of it. . . .

"Yes. I have sent him my book about it and he seems to like it thus far," Severus answered.

"You sent him 'The Art of Parsel'?" Minerva asked, knowing how much the potions master guarded that book from everyone.

"I have read it enough," he answered simply. "He will be able to put it to good use."

"Who are you and what have you done with Severus?" Minerva asked.

Severus and the others were not sure if she was joking or not. The Head of Slytherin raised an eyebrow at her, looking as if he thought she had lost her mind.

"Well, I believe we have much to look forward to this year," Filius piped up, wisely moving the conversation along.

Severus appreciated it.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks for the reviews ^^ . Next part, **Better Be**, is in the works.

Better Be

Part 4: Better be

Harry made it into an empty compartment, having taken Severus' advice and arriving early. The Dursleys had behaved themselves for the past month, though they completely avoided and ignored him. Harry was elated. It had given him plenty of time to read all he wished and prepare for the coming school year.

He swore to himself he would do his best in every aspect of his classes, if only to show the professor he had not wasted his time on investing in him — and, his more important and private reason, to maybe . . . maybe make the professor proud of him.

He would rather get dragged across the playground by the back of his shirt than disappoint the potions master, especially after how he had gotten permission from the Headmaster to allow Harry two pets.

Harry straightened, reopening 'The Art of Parsel' to continue reading it. He only had four more chapters left.

K-knock.

Harry looked up, never having heard a *hesitant* knock before in his life.

"H-hi. H-have you seen a toad?" a chubby, awkward boy asked.

"Um. . . ."

:There is a toad in the boy's left cargo pocket: Coral stated, her tongue flickering out, just hidden by Harry's left sleeve. :I can taste him from here:

Harry touched her head gently.

"Have you looked in your cargo pockets?" Harry asked, pointing to the boy's lumpy left pocket.

"Oh!" Neville exclaimed, sticking his hand in the pocket and pulling out a pathetic looking amphibian. "Thanks! Um, would you mind if I joined you?"

"Not at all," Harry answered. "You can have a seat," he added when the boy hovered by the doorway.

"Thanks." He sat down, twiddling his thumbs after shutting the sliding door. "So, uh,

how did you know where Trevor was?" he asked, lifting the toad up.

"Well, um, my familiar told me," Harry answered, before sticking out his right hand for Neville to shake. "I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

"H-Harry Potter?" he gasped, his eyes growing extremely wide.

Harry sighed. "I'm just another wizard like you, please don't . . . don't. . . ." He waved his hands, trying to find the right words. "Don't get all weird."

Neville swallowed, composing himself. "Sorry, I just. . . ." He trailed off, before simply taking Harry's hand and clearing his throat. "I'm Neville Longbottom."

Harry smiled.

"So, you said your familiar told you where Trevor was?" Neville asked after a moment, sparing a very brief glance to Harry's forehead.

"Yeah, but . . . someone told me some people will be a little nervous at first. Can you promise not to freak out? I promise she won't hurt you or Trevor. She's actually quite gentle, and I hope I'll be able to help people through her before too long," Harry answered, putting a finger in his sleeve to pet her head.

"Uh, okay," he said, bringing Trevor closer to himself as Harry moved his hand and slowly raised his left sleeve. Neville was too stunned to gasp or react physically at all.

"Her name is Coral. She's going to help me with parselmagic," he said, encouraged by Neville's lack of reaction. "It's a magic focusing in healing and protection. See?" He lifted the parsel book, which he had placed on top of an anatomy book he had gotten from the nearby bookstore in Surrey. Harry had found it helpful to look up terms and such referenced in the parsel book. "Professor Snape gave me the book and it's brilliant. He helped me get my school supplies and things."

"P-professor Snape? I've heard he can be very strict," Neville said hesitantly, casting Coral an uneasy look.

"Oh, he is, and he told me that he doesn't like slackers and that I need to work hard and learn as much magic as I can," Harry said, curiously pleased to learn the professor's name was well known — though he knew a man like Severus Snape would have to be.

"He told you that?" Neville asked, Coral flickering her tongue at him. He held Trevor

closer to himself.

"Uh-huh. So I have been doing just that, reading ahead and stuff so I can understand what we're doing once we get to the point of casting."

Neville looked down, sad. "Gran didn't let me read ahead, she said I might do something stupid and hurt myself."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling bad for him. "Well, why don't you start reading now? I have the books for Potions and Charms with me if you want to read one of those. School has officially started, after all."

Neville perked up. "I think I'll read the potions book, since Professor Snape is really strict."

Harry smiled. "I would also suggest you order this book," he said, holding out 'The Beginner's Guide to the Art of Brewing: Ingredients'.

"Okay, I will," he quickly agreed.

A few people passed by their compartment but left them alone as more and more students loaded the train. Soon after, the train began to move. The food cart came by sometime after that and they got some snacks, both of them reading while occasionally talking about what they found interesting or what they were looking forward to. Often, Neville would say he hoped to not disappoint his Gran.

"So, what House do you think you'll be in?" Neville asked, a little more at ease now that he knew Coral wasn't going to leave Harry's wrist.

"House? Well, Professor Snape is Head of Slytherin. I wouldn't mind being in his house, at least there I know I'll learn stuff," Harry answered with a shrug.

Neville gulped, but glanced at Coral. "I suppose you would fit in Slytherin, you already sort of have their mascot," he said with a nervous smile.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Slytherin's symbol is a snake. Salazar Slytherin was a parselmouth, he could talk to snakes."

"Oh, so can I. Professor Snape said people will think I can because of Voldemort—" Harry was interrupted by Neville's horrified gasp. "What?"

"Y-you said his name!"

"Well, it is what he called himself. Why should I call him 'You-Know-Who' or whatever?"

Neville didn't really have an answer; he was too surprised to come up with one.

"Anyway, Professor Snape said people will think it's because of *him*, but really, it's in my genes. Both of my parents happened to have the gene and the two of them together in me activated the ability. It's really no big deal. Gene stuff happens all the time. The doctor on the telly said so. Genetics probably also have something to do with whether or not someone is able to use magic. It would make sense," he explained.

Neville nodded, dumbfounded. "S-so you can talk to C-coral?"

"Yup." :Could you wave your tail to Neville, Coral?:

Coral did so, making Neville's eyebrows disappear into his hairline. "Um, hi?" he answered, uncertainly.

:The chunky boy sure frightens easily, doesn't he? But he smells nice, and his magic is quite strong: she hissed.

Neville gulped loudly. Harry chuckled.

"Don't worry, she just said you smell nice and that your magic is strong," Harry answered.

Neville blinked. "My magic?"

Harry nodded, not noticing Neville's shift in posture. "She told me she can sense that sort of stuff, it'll really help me later if I ever need to heal someone. She'll be able to tell me how sick or hurt they really are and if I can use their magic to help them or if I will need to use my own."

"Wow," he whispered, part of him warming up to the little colorful snake. "So she will help you heal people?"

"Yup. I'm not quite sure how to do it yet, but thanks to this book, I'm getting a good idea. I'm hoping to help out in the nurse's office at some point, if the school has one."

"Oh, they do. It's called the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey is the school nurse. She's visited my Gran a few times," Neville explained, before he blushed. "She had to fix my arm when I tripped down the stairs during her visit."

Harry nodded. "Accidents happen sometimes. Everyone falls."

"I'm accident prone, unfortunately," Neville muttered.

"Well, then it's a good thing I'm going to learn healing, huh?" Harry said lightly.

"Yeah, probably," Neville agreed, smiling softly before growing thoughtful. "Hey, I do have a little bruise on my wrist. How far are you in that book?"

"You want me to try and heal you now?" Harry asked, a little surprised.

"Well, only if you want to. If you're planning on healing me when I get hurt in the future, then I think some practice before might. . . ." Neville trailed off, growing unsure of his idea.

"Sure, I can try. The worst that can happen with this magic is that it won't work. As long as you're not close to death, anything I do can't make it worse."

"Oh, okay. That's good to know I guess."

"So . . . wrist?" Harry asked, already kneeling on the floor in front of Neville and rolling up his sleeve to fully reveal Coral.

Neville slowly held out his right arm, holding Trevor with his left hand. The bruise was about the size of a baseball. It was healing pretty well and was only slightly bluish toward the middle, though Harry wondered what a 'large' bruise was if this was 'small'.

"Let me know if you feel anything," Harry said, placing Neville's wrist in his right hand as he hovered his left above, just like he had read. Coral hovered above as well, her tongue flickering right over it. "Okay. . . . :Muscle and tissue, heal: Harry said, just as the compartment door slid open. . . .

There were several loud gasps as Coral lowered her head onto the bruise, making it give a brief glow. Suddenly, the bruise began shrinking . . . shrinking until there was no more of it left.

"Wow," Neville breathed.

"Bloody hell!" someone exclaimed.

Harry and Neville turned to the now open door, finding three boys just beyond it.

"Y-you speak parseltongue!" the middle boy shouted. He was the shortest of the three and had white slick hair.

The two large boys on either side of him stared at him dumbly.

"I do," Harry answered, getting back up and standing before them, Coral lifting her head and looking at them.

"Wicked! You have a snake too! You'll definitely get into Slytherin," he said.

"Neville said something similar," Harry said.

Draco stepped forward, holding out his hand. "I'm Draco, Draco Malfoy. This is Crabbe, and Goyle."

The two boys behind him gave brief nods. Harry looked at them, before focusing back on Draco, his last name ringing a bell. Malfoy . . . Lucius Malfoy. The man Professor Snape had warned him about. This boy must be his son, and if that was the case, then he must also be the professor's godson.

"Do they not have first names?" Harry asked, though not exactly positive those names were their last.

"Vincent and Gregory," Draco answered with a shrug.

"I'm Harry Potter," he answered, before motioning to Neville as he shook Draco's hand and let go.

"Oh, I'm Neville Longbottom," Neville stated, realizing he was just staring at them. He tentatively offered his hand.

"Longbottom, eh?" Draco asked, his voice getting an odd lilt to it that Harry couldn't identify. He didn't like it though. Draco stiffly shook Neville's hand before he focused back on Harry. Harry got the feeling the only reason he took Neville's hand was to be polite. "We have a compartment closer to the engine. Want to join us?" Draco asked, not looking at Neville.

Harry glanced at Neville, before looking back to the odd blond boy. "What's wrong with just staying here? There's enough room for all of us, and I still have some things for us to eat."

Draco wrinkled his nose a little, as if it was a hard decision to be made and needed to be thought over. "I suppose," he said finally. "We can get our things later."

Neville scooted closer to the window to make room while Harry sat next to him, leaving the bench across from them clear. Draco motioned Crabbe to take the place closest to the window while he sat directly across from Harry and Goyle sat closest to the door.

Draco looked around, before spotting the books. "I see you've been reading ahead."

"A little," Harry admitted with a shrug.

"My father had me begin reading a few months ago. He wouldn't let me cast anything, but he showed me a few spells with his wand," Draco bragged.

"How much have you read?" Harry asked, curious.

"Oh, just a few chapters into each book," he answered, trying to be nonchalant but failing. He was quite proud of his accomplishment and was enjoying the chance to brag in front of the Boy-Who-Lived. "You?"

"I started reading when I got back from Diagon Alley. I've spent most of my free time reading," Harry replied, not wanting to reveal too much.

Draco nodded. "So, uh, what were you doing exactly when we came in?"

"Practicing parselmagic. Professor Snape sent me this awesome book when he learned I could talk to snakes. He also gave me permission to have Coral," Harry said.

"Parselmagic?" Vincent Crabbe asked with a grunt.

"Yeah. Professor Snape said the most powerful healing and protection spells are from parselmagic, and only Parselmouths can use it. He also said Voldemort—" Harry paused with a sigh when Draco and the others flinched. "Really? Is everyone going to do that when I say his name?"

Draco and the others shrugged apologetically. "We've grown up not hearing it, and it's sort of . . . a taboo, you know?"

"Not really," Harry answered, before continuing what he had been saying. "Anyway, he said Voldemort was a parselmouth as well but didn't have the patience or desire to learn it because Voldemort wasn't really into helping others."

"And you are?" Draco asked, intrigued, trying not to flinch too badly as Harry continued saying the Dark Lord's name.

Harry looked at him, confused. "Well, yeah, aren't you?"

Draco waved his hand dismissively. "There are people who work, people who follow, and people who lead." The way he said it, Harry was certain he was repeating something he heard often.

"Hmm, if that's the case, I'll be happy to be a worker and help people," Harry answered honestly, thinking back to the parsel book and imagining himself doing what he had read about — healing people and making a difference, saving lives.

He would prove the Dursleys wrong. He would make the Professor proud. He would work hard and unlock his magic. He would reach his potential.

"Really? I would have pegged you for a leader type," Draco said, glancing at Harry's forehead.

Harry shrugged. "Leader or not, work is still involved. I would rather do something I like to do."

"You don't want to lead?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Well, I just thought, with you being . . . who you are, you would want to."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not some savior that's come to lead. I'm just a first year who wants to learn magic, like you."

Impressed, Draco smiled. Vince and Greg looked confused and surprised. "I like you, Potter. You're not what I had expected. If you happen to not get into Slytherin, let's still be friends."

"Is being friends with someone in a different house another taboo?" Harry asked, incredulously.

Draco chuckled. "No, not exactly, but I'm going to be in Slytherin; I know it."

"So. . . ?"

"Well, the other houses sort of don't like Slytherin," Draco answered.

Harry looked to Neville.

"It's true, Harry. In the past, many d-dark wizards have come from there," Neville

said, answering his unspoken question.

Harry frowned.

"It's stupid," Draco continued. "People just don't like Slytherin because they're jealous they're not as strong or as powerful."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Uh, Harry, I think we're almost there. We need to get our robes on," Neville spoke up.

"Okay."

"See you later. Our robes are in our compartment," Draco said, getting up.

"Alright. Nice meeting you," Harry said.

The three boys left, Vince and Greg shadowing Draco. The door closed.

"Well, that was interesting, huh, Neville?"

Neville nodded, a little overwhelmed.

"Professor Snape told me to stay away from Draco's father. Don't tell anyone I told you."

"Okay, Harry. I promise."

"But Draco doesn't seem too bad, does he? I mean, he seemed a little stiff with you and sort of stuffy."

"Yeah, but I still think we should be careful," Neville advised. "Gran told me Malfoy Senior is a very bad man."

Harry smiled when Neville said 'we', but grew a little concerned with the warning. "Well, we'll just have to watch each other's backs then."

Neville straightened a little, swelling with pride that the Boy-Who-Lived would say something like that . . . *to him*. It was in that moment he decided something. He would have Harry Potter's back no matter what.

O o O o O

They entered Hogwarts after traveling across the lake to where an older professor took over from Hagrid.

Introducing herself as Professor McGonagall, she told them a little bit about the houses before disappearing. Harry and Neville stayed close together and while they waited Draco and his two buddies rejoined them.

"Ready, Potter?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, you?" he replied, ignoring the reactions of people around them.

Many people were staring, while a few actually inched away, as if nervous.

"Of course," Draco answered as someone came up right beside Neville, leaning in close.

"Hey, I heard you have a pet snake, can I see?" a simple looking boy asked excitedly.

A few people screamed at that and pulled back, while others surged forward, saying things like 'Really?' 'Wicked!' 'Ooo, can I see too?'

Harry brought his left arm to his chest protectively. "Uh…."

Neville moved beside him suddenly, not really thinking about what he was doing as Draco and his two friends stepped up as well, also coming to Harry's aid. It was clear Harry did not like being crowded by random crazy people and appreciated their support.

Coral poked her head out of his sleeve, wanting to know what was going on.

:Harry, what's going on?: she asked.

Neville was to Harry's left, closest to her. Draco was to his right and a little in front of him, while Vince and Greg were behind. The four of them created a make-shift barrier around him.

"Wicked cool! What kind of snake is that?" the same boy asked, unbothered by Harry's bodyguards.

"She's a magical coral snake. Her name is Coral," Harry answered.

"I thought only cats, owls, or toads were allowed for pets," a girl with frizzy hair said contemplatively. "How do you have a snake?"

"I got permission," Harry said, a little annoyed. What business was it of theirs?

Just then, thankfully, Professor McGonagall returned. "We are ready for you now. Follow me."

They followed, Neville going in beside him, Draco and Vince taking up the rear with Goyle right behind.

O o O o O

Severus heaved an internal sigh. He knew it would have gotten out eventually, but on the first day? Before the boy had even been sorted?

Soon after the students had entered the Great Hall, a Slytherin Prefect went up to him and stated that he had learned a bit of information he felt he should share with him. There was a rumor going around on the train that not only was Harry Potter on board, but he was a parselmouth, and that, evidently, he had a pet snake.

Severus didn't even attempt to act surprised, but simply told the prefect, Mr. Terence Higgs, that he already knew and that it was he who gave Mr. Potter permission to have the snake as a pet. He also told the prefect that he would discuss it in the Common Room after dinner and that if anyone had any questions to simply tell them that. The prefect and the seeker of Slytherin nodded, before heading back to the table.

A moment later, the first years came in, and he was actually quite pleased with what he saw. Having Neville right beside Harry could only be good for the future, and having Draco and his friends surrounding them may be just as beneficial if guided correctly. Wherever Harry got sorted that night, he would need to advise Draco accordingly.

He smiled, instantly knowing upon seeing Neville's face that he wouldn't need to interfere there at all. Harry already had that boy's undying loyalty. The train ride must have been very interesting.

Severus scanned the group of nervous first years as they gathered at the front.

Ron was beside Dean and Seamus, all three of them staring at Harry and glancing constantly at his left sleeve. Ah, so they had already caught sight of Coral then. . . . He wondered if Ron would be Harry's friend this time, but decided he would leave that path alone. He would let Harry and fate run that without his interference.

Hermione was off by herself, muttering, no doubt running through everything she

had read about the Wizarding World, nervous about the sorting. Severus wondered if she had helped Neville with his toad issue. By the looks of things, probably not.

Severus blinked, realizing he had missed the beginning of the sorting hat's song. No matter, it wasn't like he hadn't heard it before.

Finally, Minerva stepped up and began calling the students' names.

As the sorting continued, all the students were sorted where he had remembered, until it came to Neville.

He sat there in silence, fidgeting a bit until the sorting hat seemed to nod, as if deciding something, and shouted out, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

Severus blinked. The train ride must have been very interesting to have made the sorting hat latch onto the boy's loyalty instead of his hidden bravery.

Neville hurried off to the Hufflepuff table, sparing Harry a long pained look. Harry waved supportively and gave him a kind smile. That seemed to calm Neville enough for him to sit down with the rest of the Hufflepuff first years and watch the rest of the sorting.

Hermione and Ron were both placed in Gryffindor, and Draco was of course placed in Slytherin.

Finally, it was Harry's turn, and, just like last time, whispers erupted when his name was called.

He held his left arm close against himself as he stepped forward, weaving around the unsorted first years. Minerva placed the hat on him once he was seated.

Severus would have nearly given anything to hear the conversation now going on in Harry's head, but, alas, he could not.

O o O o O

'Ah, Mr. Potter.'

'Uh, yeah?' Harry said, mentally answering the voice. He knew it was the sorting hat, but it was still bizarre.

'Hmm. Let me take a look around, you are difficult to read. You have many layered traits.'

'Um, okay. Uh. . . . if you have any questions about what you find, feel free to ask me. This is my head, after all.'

The hat chuckled in his mind. 'Indeed it is, Mr. Potter.'

Harry sat in silence, the whole hall staring fixedly at him, wondering what was taking so long.

'Hmm. Well, I'll say, it's been quite some time since I have sat on a head of this complexity, Mr. Potter,' the hat said after a moment. 'I see you have a fine mind. Quick and eager to learn, but I do not think Ravenclaw is for you. You have deeper traits that are stronger in you than what Ravenclaw seeks.'

"Hmm," the hat hummed, out loud this time as he shifted, wiggling on top of Harry's head.

This, of course, made the whispers flare back to life once again. Harry wondered if his hair would actually be messier from the hat.

'You are quite cunning when you need to be, but you do not have the heart of a Slytherin; though, you do have their instincts. Hmm.'

'Put me where I will have the best chance of reaching my full potential. The potential Professor Snape spoke of. Please,' Harry requested earnestly, a large part of him hoping to go into the potion master's house.

'Hmm. An interesting thing you ask of me. Alright, let me see. . . .'

The hat went silent once again, and Harry could feel an odd heaviness in his mind, though he didn't feel anything else.

The sorting hat then gasped, loudly. Harry desperately hoped that had not been out loud, but by the elevated whispers in the hall, he doubted it.

'The Legacy Spell, Mr. Potter? Severus Snape cast that on you?' The hat's voice rattled within his mind, stunned.

Harry froze. He really didn't know what to say. He didn't want to try and lie, but he also didn't want the professor in trouble. 'You're not going to get him in trouble if he did, are you?'

'No, I won't get him in trouble, Mr. Potter. Discovering he had used the spell just took me by surprise,' he said, softening his tone as he collected himself. 'I wonder where

he learned it. . . .'

'Why?' Harry asked.

'It is an old forbidden spell. Many wizarding families still know of it and grow horrified when they hear it mentioned in any conversation, but few know the incantation.'

Harry frowned, confused. He paid no mind to the whispering in the Great Hall now.

'It is another 'taboo', as young Malfoy would say, because it has a very dark past.'

'What happened?' Harry asked.

Time was immaterial at this point to Harry and the hat. They were so entrenched in the conversation to care about how long they were taking.

'Centuries ago, in the time of the founders, it was a common spell used on newborns. It was a spell of necessity, assisting the parents in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their children to better raise and teach them. It was a good and helpful spell, one used with love and anticipation by a parent or guardian. But then things changed. Family rivalries surfaced, and the strength of bloodlines became the focal point in pureblood families.'

'What did they do?' Harry asked, waiting with bated breath.

'If an infant did not possess enough magical power, or did not meet the family's standards or expectations, they were murdered or cast out. The few cast out children disappeared into the muggle world, revoking their magic and forbidding their offspring from entering the wizarding world, warning them of the atrocities being committed there. The horrible use of the Legacy Spell continued into the 1800's, and ended around the time the Headmaster was a wee lad.'

Harry swallowed thickly, trying to stomach the lesson in history he had just been given.

'Mr. Potter, like many spells, they are not good or evil. It is the witch or wizard casting them that determines their nature. Never forget that,' the hat said very sternly and seriously.

Harry nodded, blinking a few times to chase away the moisture now gathering in his eyes.

'Now, how about I get back to sorting you, and let the past be the past?' the hat

suggested.

Harry smiled softly. 'Okay.'

There was a long silence as the hat went back to rummaging through his head, before the hat paused.

'Get off the stool,' the sorting hat suddenly instructed.

Not having a reason not to obey, Harry did exactly that. Now standing a few feet from McGonagall and a step from the stool, he waited for further instructions.

McGonagall and everyone else in the hall waited in bewildered curiosity.

'Please pace for me, Mr. Potter, this is going to take every technique I have ever needed in the past and then some,' he said. 'Albus paces all the time and it seems to help him.'

Harry nudged the sorting hat up with his right hand to get him off of his eyes so he could see where he was going. He then began pacing in front of the head table. Pacing about three yards, back and forth.

McGonagall looked to Dumbledore for guidance. Should she stop Harry and ask what was going on?

Albus waved her back, silently telling her to let Mr. Potter and the sorting hat be for now.

'Okay, Slytherin is not for you. Though you would do well there, no doubt about that.' The sorting hat then nodded to himself, balancing precariously on Harry's head as the pacing continued. 'Okay, stop pacing. Just sway for right now . . . I'm searching. . . .'

Harry did so, rocking from side-to-side as he closed his eyes. He didn't want to see everyone staring. He felt ridiculous enough.

'You are very brave, but . . . hmm. No, that wouldn't do,' he continued, talking to himself now before he stiffened. 'Ah-ha!' Evidently the hat had come to a decision. "Right, then . . . . Right! Okay . . ." the hat said out loud. "Better be . . . . HUFFLEPUFF!"

Harry stopped swaying, snapping his eyes open.

'Work hard and always do your best, Mr. Potter, because Severus was right. Your

potential is nearly limitless. Its limit . . . is you,' the hat said, barely managing to do so before McGonagall plucked him off Mr. Potter's now sweaty head.

Harry joined Neville at the Hufflepuff table, the students there screaming incoherently. They were quite ecstatic Harry Potter had been sorted into their house. Professor Sprout was clapping just as excitedly, happy to have another Hufflepuff.

O o O o O

Severus didn't know if he should be grateful or horrified.

This could either be a very good thing, or an awful awful thing. There were so many pros and cons he knew he would never have a hope of determining the likely outcome of this.

On the one hand, Harry had Neville by his side and there wouldn't be the whole Slytherin-Gryffindor rivalry he would have to contend with. That would allow him to more easily help Harry and could provide the boy with a broader base of support.

On the other hand, Harry wouldn't be as close to Ron and Hermione as he had been last time, at least Severus didn't think so. He knew Ron was the type to stick to his own house, and since it seemed he had yet to really meet Harry. . . . As for Hermione, she would be too busy with class work to pay any attention to classmates, let alone classmates not in her own house. It was rather sad, but it couldn't really be helped.

What would result from this? What would the coming years be like without the famous Golden Trio?

Severus looked at the students before him, noticing Draco waving at Harry from the Slytherin table and Harry returning it, although with a little less energy. He was currently having to bear the brunt of countless stares and whispers.

Looking at Neville, he was once again pleased with the shy, nervous boy. Ignoring his own discomfort, he was doing his best to be Harry's silent support.

O o O o O

"Welcome to Hufflepuff," an older boy greeted, speaking to all of the first years. "I'm Cedric Diggory." He held out his hand toward Harry since he happened to be directly across from him.

"Hi, I'm Harry," he said tentatively.

"I'm curious. Why did you pace when you were being sorted?" Cedric asked, deciding not to ask about the other oddities the hat displayed, such as gasping out loud.

"The hat told me to. He told me it would help him sort me," Harry said with a shrug.

"Interesting. I've never seen that done before, but I suppose since your sorting was taking a while it makes sense," Cedric said, intrigued, before looking to Neville.

"Neville Longbottom," he said.

And so it continued, everyone introducing themselves while they began to eat.

"So you're Harry Potter, are you?" a loud kid asked. "I'm Zacharias Smith."

"Hello," Harry said, trying to be nice, but for some reason finding himself irritated by the boy's pushy introduction. He had nearly bumped into the person sitting beside him when getting Harry's attention.

"Is it true you have the scar?" Smith asked, a few of the older students staring at his daring and rudeness.

Harry put his hand on his forehead, covering his scar. It was clear he was trying to decide whether or not to lift his hair out of the way, but a girl sitting beside him, much older than most around them, touched his elbow.

"No need for that, Harry. You don't need to show it if you don't want to," she said.

Smith huffed in irritation, ignoring the girl's brief glare at him.

"I'm the Head Girl this year. Maggie Tolbert," she said.

Maggie was a brown headed girl with short hair. She was pretty, though not drop-dead gorgeous. She had pale blue eyes and a small nose.

Harry smiled shyly, unconsciously petting Coral resting under his left sleeve. Maggie glanced at his movement while trying and failing to hide her sudden unease. Harry noticed.

"Are you afraid of snakes?" he asked gently.

"Uh, well, a little I guess," she admitted after a moment.

Many of the Hufflepuffs around were listening in, hoping to catch a glimpse of the

supposed snake and learn whether or not what they had heard on the train was true.

"Coral wouldn't hurt anyone, unless they were trying to hurt her or me," Harry said. "Would you like to see her?"

Maggie looked a little pale, but nodded her head. She was Head Girl, for crying out loud! She couldn't act like a baby!

Harry slowly moved up his sleeve, revealing Coral's form wrapped around his wrist and a little up his arm.

"Oooo," many said, leaning forward, while a few others gasped.

Coral kept her head resting on Harry's wrist as he moved his hand over his plate to show his curious classmates.

"She's beautiful!"

"Adorable!"

"Who knew a snake could look so harmless?"

"Isn't she . . . poisonous?" Cedric asked, leaning a little closer to get a good look at her.

Harry smiled, glad to see the older boy trusted him enough to not let Coral bite him. "Yeah, but Professor Snape cast a spell on her. She can't poison anyone unless she has to," he explained.

"Professor Snape?" he asked, several other students around him also surprised.

"Yeah. He's the one who gave me permission to have an exotic pet."

"That was . . . nice of him."

Harry nodded happily, petting Coral.

"But why did he? There must have been a reason," Cedric continued.

"Oh, yeah. He said it would be a good idea for me to have her because she'll make my parselmagic stronger."

"Parselmagic?" Susan Bones asked. She was sitting on the other side of Neville.

"It's healing and protective magic. Only parselmouths can use it."

Nearly the entire Hufflepuff table went absolutely still, their eyes (except Neville's) going wide as they realized what that meant. The-Boy-Who-Lived was a parselmouth!

"W-what?" Ernie Macmillan asked, his voice cracking.

Harry sighed. "It really isn't that big of a deal. I don't understand why everyone has such a fit about me speaking parseltongue. It's just as annoying as the whole 'Voldemort'—"

A few people shrieked, two people fell off the bench, one person nearly fainted, half the table gasped, and most of the rest jumped.

It was utterly ridiculous.

Harry groaned.

"H-Harry, you are certainly not what I had expected," Cedric managed with a kind smile, gathering himself before most of the others.

Harry looked down at his food and began picking at it. Coral lifted her head, looking at Harry with what those at the table would label as concern.

:Are you okay, Harry?: she asked, nudging the side of his hand with her head.

:Yeah, I guess:

His reply unfortunately caused more reactions from those at the table, and even from a few people behind him in Ravenclaw who had been eavesdropping.

:They'll get used to it: she soothed.

"You know, it's actually pretty cool," Justin Finch-Fletchley said. He was a rich looking boy beside Ernie. "So this parselmagic, have you used it at all yet?"

Being a muggleborn, Justin was one of the few at the table not bothered by Harry's ability or the use of Voldemort's name. In fact, he was just as confused and annoyed by everyone's reactions as Harry was.

Harry looked up, no longer poking at his food as he nodded.

"He used it on me on the train!" Neville blurted out, more than happy to tell them

what Harry had done for him. "He healed a bad bruise on my wrist. It had been this big—" He showed him his wrist and illustrated with his other hand how much area the bruise had covered. "—And he made it go away. It feels so much better now."

The Hufflepuffs stared, entranced by Neville's account before looking back at Harry.

"Wow."

"Bloody awesome."

"You should help Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing."

"Can you heal animals too?"

"Hey, I have a cut on my arm, could you heal that?"

"Can you heal scars?"

"What does it feel like?"

"Could you regrow something like an arm?"

"Can you heal diseases?"

"Whoa-whoa. Let's not bombard him with so many questions," Maggie said, holding up her hands and halting the interrogation. "Especially questions he probably doesn't have the answers to yet."

Harry looked at her gratefully and got back to eating.

Seeing that he wasn't going to answer their questions now and that they themselves should eat before dinner ended, the Hufflepuffs let him be. Maggie's stern look might have only had a little to do with it.

O o O o O

"Hmm, perhaps you should go down there, Pomona," Filius suggested as he watched the reaction to Harry's pet snake ripple across the table.

"No, I believe Ms. Tolbert has the situation under control," she answered calmly. "But I will be holding a longer house meeting tonight. It would be remiss of me not to."

Filius nodded, only to look quickly back to the table as a few of the students screamed.

"What in Merlin's name?" Minerva asked, now looking as well.

Seeing that two of the students had landed on the floor from whatever was happening down there, Minerva was about to stand up and get down there herself to see what on earth was going on.

"Wait, Minerva," Albus stated, subtly placing his hand on her forearm before motioning to Harry's snake with a sharp nod.

From where they were, they could barely see her, but it was clear she and Harry were having a conversation, no matter how brief. And then a first year spoke up, which led to Neville talking. It was clear that whatever he had said turned the Hufflepuffs' fear into curiosity as they then began pelting Harry with questions before Maggie interrupted and settled things down.

"Well, Pomona, I look forward to hearing from you after you have the meeting with your house," Filius said.

"I agree," Minerva said.

Severus hid a smile.

O o O o O

A/N: Well, there it is. After a very long mental struggle and looking at certain things in canon and what Severus has changed, I decided this was the best choice for Harry. I know there are few well written Hufflepuff!Harry stories, but considering everything, the other houses simply will not fit with what I have planned or with the Harry of this story. I won't bother trying to explain further. Hopefully my writing will speak for itself.

Thanks again for all the reviews ^^

Next part, *Lessons*, is in the works.

Lessons

Part 5: Lessons

Harry woke up the next day, wishing he had a few more hours to sleep but knowing it was time to get ready. Stretching, he went over and scratched Hedwig's head before gathering his clothes. As Professor Snape had advised him, he had his wand holsters secured and took his wands and Coral with him everywhere. The silver necklace was around his neck. Harry had yet to take it off since the potions master had given it to him.

Before heading to bed the previous night, a meeting had taken place in their Common Room, which was located in the basement of the castle. They met Professor Pomona Sprout, and Harry liked her immediately. She was straightforward and kind and had made it clear that they were all Hufflepuff, and as such should treat everyone fairly and equally. Harry appreciated the effort she made to get the house to treat him normally, though he knew it would take time before they stopped staring. He hoped it wouldn't take too long.

Breakfast was an interesting affair, the variety of food surprising him. He wondered how many cooks Hogwarts had, but then, he supposed, all of this could be made with magic. Ignoring the curious looks and not so subtle whispers, Harry brought his cup to his lips.

"Urgh," he gasped, the taste of Absorbance Potion saturating his tongue.

He immediately turned and looked at Professor Snape who was sitting at the head table. The professor must have been watching him because he was already looking right at him. Locking eyes, the potions master mouthed a very clear word, 'drink'.

Harry quickly did just that, chugging the drink away. Putting the cup back down, he watched in amazement as it refilled with another liquid. Certain it was the Draught of Nourishment, he chugged again, only to repeat the process when it refilled with the Utilization Potion.

"Wow, Harry. Thirsty much?" Cedric asked, having seen the second and third chug.

"Yeah," he said, before chugging for the fourth time to get the taste out of his mouth.

Neville gave Harry a curious look, but said nothing. Soon after, Professor Sprout came around and handed them their schedules.

"Brilliant, we have Potions first!" Harry said quite happily.

He received several horrified and confused looks.

"What?" he asked, now confused himself.

Several of the older students shook their heads. "You'll see," one of them said.

Harry looked at Cedric, wanting an explanation. Hesitantly, Cedric replied. "Well, you see, Harry, Professor Snape is . . . well, he can be pretty strict and sometimes . . . a bit harsh. I don't think there's ever been a year where he didn't make a few first years cry. Sometimes he even makes a few of the older students quite upset."

Harry frowned. The Professor had seemed strict in Diagon Alley, sure, and some of the things he said to him had been very direct and brutally honest, but he couldn't really see that man being downright mean. Well . . . maybe he could be to someone like Dudley, and he had probably been aggressive with the Dursleys in that little discussion Harry hadn't been privy to. They had certainly left him alone after that and made sure he had a full plate at every meal time. And he supposed the potions master did look a bit intimidating, tall and wearing all black.

He looked at Neville who was looking quite horrified.

"We'll just have to do our best and see," Harry said. "But I think Professor Snape is great."

"O-okay, Harry," Neville said, though he still looked a bit uneasy.

O o O o O

Severus waited for all of the first years to enter before he stepped from his hiding place and entered the room, his cape billowing behind him.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making," he began. He scanned the faces before them, his heart clenching slightly as he recalled a few of their deaths.

Susan Bones had been killed by Voldemort himself after she had taken down two of his lieutenants. That had been almost a year after the fall of Hogwarts.

Justin Finch-Fletchley had been bitten by Nagini after defending his family in a raid.

And Hannah Abbot had succumbed to a curse she had received from Lucius Malfoy three days before that.

He cleared his throat, somehow managing to look sternly at them all. "Since there is no foolish wand waving here, most of you will find it hard to believe this is magic. As such, I don't expect many of you will understand the beauty of softly simmering cauldrons with their shimmering fumes or the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins with the ability to either save or take a life. . . . I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even . . . put a stopper in death. The only question is . . . are you a lazy good for nothing dunderhead, or are you willing and capable of learning one of the strongest magicks in existence?"

Severus nearly smiled. He had their complete and undivided attention, though he noticed only Harry was writing down what he had said. He fought back the regret that trickled in from the back of his mind. The boy had been interested initially the first time around, and he had ruined it — all because of a petty childhood squabble he hadn't been able to forgive or get past at that time.

He went through roll call, not pausing at all when he read Harry's name, just like he should have last time. He then went through the lesson, outlining what they would be doing as they got out their equipment and paired up. Thankfully, they wouldn't be brewing anything that lesson. They would be learning how to use the equipment and the techniques needed to chop, cut, slice, and dice properly.

Harry and Neville were working well together, though Severus knew Zacharias Smith, who was working behind them with a Ravenclaw, would need to be watched carefully. He was a malicious boy whose only stronger trait was cowardice.

Severus decided to reveal some of his own maliciousness if Mr. Smith decided to be foolish in his class. He had last time around, after all, and at least then he could let go some of his negative emotions without feeling bad later.

"P-Professor Snape?" a Ravenclaw asked, raising his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Duncan?" he asked, turning to the table where the student was stationed.

"Will these knives ever get dull? Muggle knives do and I wondered. . . ." he trailed off and gulped.

Evidently, he had heard about the Professor's alleged loyalties with purebloods and bias against muggleborns and all non-Slytherins.

"No, Mr. Duncan, they normally don't. They will, however, corrode if you cut certain acidic plants or spill aggressive potions on them."

"Oh, okay, Professor, thanks," he said, relief flooding him when the potions master did not react as he had expected.

The potions master turned away, walking around some of the other stations to make sure the Hufflepuffs were cutting correctly.

He passed by Harry and Neville, catching sight of Coral peeking out from Harry's sleeve as the boy began practicing the technique needed to crush a certain nut. He watched as she hissed something at him and he nodded with a small smile, adjusting his hold a bit to a more correct grip. He hissed a reply that Severus deduced to be a 'thanks'.

Returning back to the front, Severus corrected a few of the students on his way.

"Professor Snape?"

He turned, finding Mr. Smith raising his hand this time.

"Yes, Mister Smith," he stated.

"Potter brought his pet snake. Aren't pets not allowed in class?" he tattletaled.

Severus narrowed his eyes. Smith smirked, oblivious to the fact that he had just invited the Professor's wrath, believing he had gotten Harry in trouble.

"Mister Smith, tell me, are you under the impression that I do not know every single thing that goes on in my classroom, miniscule or large, hidden or open?" he asked, his voice alarmingly emotionless.

"Er . . . no, sir. I just thought—" He stopped when the potions master stepped forward, towering over his desk and leaning toward him.

"Or perhaps you enjoy being an insufferable tattletale?"

"N-no, I j-just thought y-you should be t-told what P-potter—" he began, wanting to step back, but unable to out of fear.

"Do-not—lie—To-Me," the professor said dangerously, the air around him tingling with angry magic. "You wanted to get him in trouble, nothing more. There was no thought of fair play or anything else. I do not tolerate such behavior. It is deplorable." Severus glanced at the work area in front of Smith, finding it messy, and the notes the boy had taken were horrendously sloppy. Smith had no excuse for that. He grew up in a wizarding home and in a prestigious one at that.

Time to test this spoiled prince.

"Tell me, Mr. Smith, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Smith swallowed, unable to answer. He didn't have a clue.

"You don't know? Well, let's try again. Where, Mr. Smith, would you look if I asked you to find me a bezoar?"

Smith looked down.

"And what is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"I-I don't know, sir."

"Pity. Clearly, you should be focusing on your studies rather than on the pets of your peers," he stated, before turning to face Harry.

Harry straightened, preparing himself for a reprimand. Sure, the professor had told him to take Coral everywhere, but maybe he should have made sure Coral remained in his sleeve so she wouldn't distract other students.

"Mr. Potter, where would you find a bezoar?"

Harry bit his bottom lip. "In the stomach of a goat, sir." He had read that near the end of the first chapter in the potions book.

"Monkshood and wolfsbane — what is the difference?"

"Just the name. They're the same plant, professor."

"What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"A powerful sleeping potion, it's called. . . ." Harry paused, closing his eyes to try and remember. He had read about it several weeks ago. "Draught of. . . Draught of the Living Death."

"Correct, Mr. Potter. One more question. Where did you learn this information?"

"In the first chapter of 'Magical Draughts and Potions,' sir."

Severus nodded approvingly. "Fifteen points to Hufflepuff for not being a

dunderhead."

The lesson continued and finished without further incident.

O o O o O

"Hey, Potter, how was Potions?" Draco asked as Harry stepped into the Charms classroom with Neville.

"Great," Harry said, "Though I see what people mean when they say he can be really strict."

Draco laughed. "Yeah, but he's great, isn't he?"

Harry nodded, a few of the Slytherins looking at Draco with surprise. He had told them he was friends with Harry Potter, but they hadn't believed him.

Harry and Neville ended up sitting behind Draco, Vince, and Greg. They were at the far end of the class and against the wall. The classroom was made to have the students look down to where the professor could more easily demonstrate spells.

Draco turned around in his seat, as class hadn't started yet and the professor had yet to show himself. He waved at Coral, who was sticking her head out from under Harry's sleeve.

"I heard someone got in trouble for pointing Coral out to Professor Snape," Draco said.

"Oh, you heard about that already?" Harry asked, leaning over the desk to better talk with him since he was slightly below him.

"Are you kidding? A first year Ravenclaw was laughing so hard about it in Defense Against the Dark Arts that it was easy to pick up what had happened as they replayed it with their friends."

Harry glanced over at Zacharias Smith, who was near the back of the classroom. It was clear he was not happy and was currently seething. Thankfully, he was far enough away not to hear their conversation, but he probably knew the story was already circulating.

Harry nodded softly, before deciding to change the subject. "What was Defense Against the Dark Arts like?"

"It was pretty disappointing actually. Quirrell is afraid of his own shadow, and he

stutters so much it's nearly impossible to understand anything he's saying, and what I have been able to understand is lame. I'm going to stick to reading the book and just ignore whatever he's trying to teach," Draco answered. "Professor Snape has told us that that is sometimes what one must do; granted, he was talking about History of Magic."

"Okay, thanks for the heads up," Harry said.

"No problem. Anything I should know about Potions?"

"Make sure you read the first chapter before class. In Diagon Alley, he advised me to always read a chapter ahead of every lesson."

Draco nodded. "I will do that."

Just then, Professor Flitwick entered, marking the start of their first Charms lesson.

Draco and his two friends turned back around as the professor called roll.

O o O o O

Severus sat down for lunch as students began trickling into the Great Hall. He would never admit it to anyone, but it was nice to have the castle full again . . . well and whole. To him, it had been nearly three years since Hogwarts had been like this. He had missed it. Deeply.

Getting back into the routine of teaching was another thing as well. He knew his older students had noticed something was different, he only hoped it wasn't too big of a change that they would comment about it to one of the other professors.

He shook himself, realizing that even if they were to bring it up with his colleagues, there wasn't anything *bad* about the change. The only bad thing was the fact it would draw unwanted attention to himself. They would begin asking questions, wondering why he had altered his lesson plans and adjusted the way he taught certain things. They had already become suspicious enough in the Head of House meeting a few weeks before. He really didn't want to have to deal with more. But, he grudgingly acknowledged, he would have to soon, and it couldn't be helped. For the biggest thing they would no doubt notice, whether or not any student brought it up to them, was the lack of crying first years.

Sure, he had ripped into Smith like a ruthless tiger, but he had been justified (at least more than he had been in the past with students). It wasn't like his old verbal assaults, where he would bash a student's confidence against the wall and pound it

until there was nothing left but tears.

He quietly sighed. The lack of tearful first years would be his undoing.

O o O o O

Harry entered the DADA classroom behind Neville and Susan Bones. Quickly, the room was full with first year Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. It was the second day of classes and Harry was eager to learn more about magic.

Harry looked around, finding a flaming red haired boy sitting next to a brown headed boy at the table beside his and Neville's. There were two other Gryffindor boys behind them. The Gryffindor girls had claimed their seats on the far side of the room, and the only thing Harry was able to gather from them was that they were all avoiding a frizzy haired girl who ended up closest to the Gryffindor boys. She was currently reading the DADA book and was the same girl who had said snakes were not on the allowed pet list.

"Really, Weasley, I cannot believe you brought your pet rat to class," the frizzy haired girl said, no longer reading her book and looking at the red headed boy at the table beside her.

"Mind your own business, Granger, I'm not breaking the rules," he answered testily.

She huffed. "Honestly, I wish I hadn't said anything about the rules I had looked up," she said.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"You better not let your rat disrupt the lesson," she said. Harry wondered if she noticed how bossy she was being. "Otherwise, you might lose our house points."

"He just sleeps, so stop being so pushy. He's not your pet anyway," he said, turning his back to her and petting his rat — which he had placed on the desk beside his DADA book.

Harry looked back at Neville, both of them finding the exchange between the two Gryffindors interesting.

"I wonder what rules she was referring to exactly," Harry said quietly.

"Padma Patil from Ravenclaw told me Granger looked up the rules on pets after she had heard about Professor Snape allowing you to keep Coral in class," Susan Bones

said, leaning toward them from her table she was sharing with Justin.

"She was that concerned about it?" Harry asked.

Susan shrugged. "Evidently, and then she informed the Gryffindors that the rules say pets are allowed in class, but that they cannot interrupt the lesson or disrupt class."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Susan."

"No problem."

Harry turned back to the front of the class as the DADA professor stepped out from his office and to the board.

"G-good m-orn-ning c-class," he began.

Harry instantly recalled Draco's advise about just ignoring the lecture and reading instead.

"T-this w-w-will be y-you f-first l-lesson in D-defense Ag-against th-the D-dark Arts c-class."

Harry blinked. Draco was right. He glanced at Neville, who was no doubt remembering Draco's words the day before.

The lesson, or rather the stuttering mess, continued from there. Harry could hardly wait until lunch, especially when he started getting a headache. He wondered if it was from listening to Professor Quirrell talking or if it was something else, though the fact that his scar was hurting didn't make sense at all.

Finally, the lesson ended, and they all stood and began heading out.

Harry briefly heard Weasley's name being called by the stuttering professor, and wondered if it was because of the rat — after all, rats were not on the normal pet list and might be considered exotic. Not looking back, Harry headed to the Great Hall with the other Hufflepuffs, hoping his headache would go away.

O o O o O

The first week came to an end and Harry couldn't believe how quickly it had gone by. He was now especially grateful he had read ahead and done what the Professor had suggested. The assignments were much easier since he had done so, and his penmanship was by far one of the best of his peers. He was fairly confident he would at the very least get Acceptables on all of his finished assignments.

He was enjoying most of his classes. Transfiguration, he decided, would be fun when transfiguring objects and elements only. He wasn't looking forward to casting on animals and changing them. It just felt so wrong for some reason. Charms seemed to be quite promising, and he was really looking forward to getting into the more advanced spells, like ones that animated objects. Herbology was relaxing. It reminded him of the days he spent in the yard gardening for the Dursleys. Neville was a natural, and the two of them happily worked alongside each other during the lessons with Ravenclaw. Potions was easily his favorite class, and Neville was finding himself enjoying it as well, especially when Professor Snape commented that Herbology was very useful in Potions and that someone hoping to be a potions master had better be knowledgeable in Herbology or they would be doomed for failure.

The two classes he was not enjoying were Defense Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic. Both were unbelievably boring, and, on top of that, he kept getting bizarre headaches in DADA. Bizarre because it seemed as if the headaches were always centered on his scar.

He hadn't really told anyone yet, except Coral, though he had briefly mentioned getting headaches to Neville but hadn't said more than that. Coral said he should tell someone, but he honestly didn't know how, and who should he tell? And what was he going to tell them – 'Whenever I go into the DADA classroom, I get a scar-ache, oh, and sometimes in the Great Hall'?

But, he supposed he could tell Professor Snape. He would at least hear him out and maybe be able to tell him what to do. Hopefully. He also wanted to ask the professor about other things he was curious about. Coral wholeheartedly agreed.

Maybe he could go to him tomorrow, after he had visited Hagrid? Hagrid had sent him a note the day before, inviting him for tea.

"Whatcha thinking about, Harry?" Neville asked, coming over and sitting beside him on the couch.

The Common Room was empty because most everyone had gone outside since classes that week were over.

Harry gave his scar a short rub. Neville glanced up at it, a little concerned.

"Are you alright? Have a headache again?" he asked.

Harry nodded. They had just come back from lunch. "It's really weird. I've noticed it

only happens in DADA and sometimes in the Great Hall. I don't know what's causing it."

"Maybe you're allergic to something. Maybe a certain type of food or something that's also in DADA? You know, there is a lot of garlic in that classroom, and garlic is often used in cooking," he said.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think it's garlic. I've cooked with that loads of times. But maybe it's something else like that. But it's not just a headache. It's my scar. It sort of throbs a bit, and the headache branches out from it. I don't know, maybe it's a warning of some kind."

Neville frowned. "Well, don't you think you should tell someone? Has it ever hurt before?"

"It's never hurt before, but yeah, I'm going to go tell Professor Snape when I get the chance. Maybe he can tell me what it means. Who knows, maybe it's just some weird herb that reacts to curse scars or something?"

"Maybe. But maybe you should tell Professor Sprout too. I mea—"

"Tell me what, dear?" a kind voice asked from behind them.

"Professor Sprout!" Harry couldn't help but gasp as he rotated about.

"Sorry I scared you, Messrs. Potter and Longbottom, and I had not meant to overhear, but what is it you should tell me?" she asked, her soft features giving her a loving glow.

Neville looked at Harry uncertainly.

"I need to go talk with Professor Snape about something," he said evasively.

He didn't want to just spill it out right now, she would think he was insane!

"About what, dear?" she asked, moving around the couch to sit in the love seat across from them.

"Well, um. . . ."

Why was this so hard? he wondered. He didn't want to lie, but he didn't really feel comfortable about telling her. He had just gotten enough nerve to tell Neville a few minutes ago.

:Ask her to go with you when you talk to Professor Snape: Coral suggested, revealing her head from his sleeve.

Harry was pleasantly surprised by Sprout's lack of surprise. Instead, she looked as if she had expected Coral to suddenly make herself known. She patiently waited.

:Do you think she'll believe me?: Harry asked softly.

:You haven't given her a reason not to: Coral pointed out. :I sense she is someone you can trust this with:

Harry looked back up at his Head of House. She really was a comforting figure. Sure, she didn't look strong and intimidating like Professor Snape, but she did look like someone who could be brave and powerful when they needed to be, never mind her short stature and plump build.

"Could you go with me to speak with Professor Snape?" Harry asked. "I-uh . . . don't want to explain this multiple times."

"Of course," she agreed, standing up. "How about going now? I know he is currently in his office, and now would be a good time to visit him."

"Oh, okay." Harry got up as well, glancing at Neville.

"I think it'll be best if I wait here, Harry," he said shyly.

"Alright." Harry didn't know if he was relieved or not about Neville staying behind.

"I'll finish my Potions assignment, so when you get back, we can go over it together and make sure I didn't forget anything," he said with a hesitant smile.

Professor Sprout looked on in pride. She loved it when she saw her little 'Puffs working hard in their classes.

Harry nodded, before looking to the Herbology professor. "I'm ready, professor."

So they went out of the yellow and black common room and down to the dungeons to Snape's office.

O o O o O

Harry glanced up at Sprout as they headed down.

:The kind professor is curious about you: Coral said. : She is also concerned:

Harry looked down a Coral, finding her flicking her tongue over his hand. He often subconsciously held his left arm against himself now so that Coral was always very close. He didn't want anyone accidently bumping into her when going to and from classes.

"What do you think of Hogwarts so far, Mr. Potter?" Professor Sprout asked.

"It's great, even better than what I had read in 'Hogwarts, a History,'" he answered.

Sprout smiled. "I see you are getting along with Mr. Longbottom. Did you meet on the train?"

"Yeah. He had lost his toad, Trevor, and Coral told me where he was."

Sprout looked at Coral, whose head was uncovered, gazing at her. "She is a gorgeous snake," she said, then gave a little chuckle when Coral lifted her head proudly.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "A bit vain though."

:Hey, I am not:

:Okay, easily enamored:

:'Enamored'? Isn't that a big word for someone your age?:

:I read it in the book for controlling my inner magic Professor Snape gave me: He shrugged, before realizing he was having a side conversation and ignoring the plump professor beside him. "Sorry, Professor."

"Oh, it's fine, dear. I take it she didn't like being called vain?"

Harry laughed. "No."

Upon saying that, they made it to the potions classroom and entered, before heading to the right to where Snape's office was. Giving Harry a reassuring smile, Sprout knocked.

"Come in," they heard the potions master call through the door.

Harry stepped in first, Sprout close behind. Severus looked up from his work. With a nudge, Harry continued forward until he was right in front of the desk.

"Mr. Potter?" the Head of Slytherin House questioned, asking several questions with

only those two words.

Harry glanced at his Head of House uneasily. "Um . . . I've been getting headaches . . . strange headaches," he began.

Severus frowned.

"Oh, dear, you have?" Sprout asked, concerned. "Why haven't you gone to the nurse?"

"These are different," Harry muttered.

"What do you mean?" Snape asked.

"Well, it only happens in the Great Hall or in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and it's. . . ." Harry paused and touched his scar. "It's my scar. It hurts and the ache spreads. I told Coral and Neville, and they said I should tell someone, so I . . ." Harry blushed. "I figured I should tell you. Maybe you can figure out what I'm allergic to, being a Potions Master and all."

"Possibly." Severus shared a look with Sprout and pulled out his wand. "Mr. Potter, come around the desk for me." Harry did so, completely trusting, although curious. "I'm going to cast some diagnostic spells on you," he stated, before doing so.

Sprout watched closely.

"Hmm, yes, I detect residual evidence of a recent headache, though it is unlike any headache I have examined before. And it is indeed identifying your scar as the origin."

Sprout stepped forward. "But what is causing it, Severus? You don't think . . . ?"

Harry watched their interaction with interest. Severus didn't answer as he narrowed his eyes, bringing his wand up again. "I am going to try something, Mr. Potter, but I need your consent."

Sprout's eyebrows rose very high. "Severus, surely that is not necessary."

"It will enable me to, at the very least, rule out possible causes like: stress, fatigue, head injuries, poison, curses, and even a few dark magicks." Severus turned his eyes back to Harry.

"What will you do?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"I am going to skim the surface of your mind. I won't delve into your memories, but I will get a glimpse of what has been happening to your mind since school has started. Think of it as an inspector walking around the perimeter of a house — the house being your mind."

Harry looked up at Sprout.

"It is your decision, Mr. Potter," she said. "It could give us some answers, but can be a rather invasive approach. Only give your consent if you are comfortable with it."

Harry glanced at Coral.

:I trust Professor Snape: she stated.

"Well, if it'll help us figure out what's happening . . . okay, I consent," Harry said, looking at Severus before biting his bottom lip. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

"Very well. Just to warn you, you will have a headache after this, but it will be worse if you fight me — so don't. Ready?" Severus was staring right into Harry's eyes as Harry nodded. "*Legilimens*."

Harry felt a pressure grow at the front of his forehead, before the pressure spread out. He felt dazed, awake, yet not. He had to fight the alarm growing at his center as he felt a presence solidify in his mind, much like the sorting hat, but much, much stronger. He knew it was Professor Snape, but it didn't make it any less strange. He felt the professor shift in his mind, skimming across the surface like he had said he would. It was the most bizarre experience Harry had ever felt. And then it was over. His eyes refocused, finding the Potions Master rubbing his temple and looking quite wary and upset.

"Professor?" Harry asked.

Sprout was looking on anxiously.

Finally, Severus spoke. "Someone has been trying to enter Mr. Potter's mind, and they have already made alarming progress."

Sprout gasped, quickly placing a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "Should I get the Headmaster, Severus?"

The potions master nodded without hesitation. "Yes, he needs to know about this right away."

"Someone's been trying to get in my head?" Harry cried, understandably upset.

:Who are they? I'll kill 'em! No one tries to do anything like that to my Harry! I'll bite 'em! Rip their eyes out! How dare they?: Coral hissed lividly.

Harry was undeniably terrified. How was he supposed to protect himself from this? And who was doing this, and why?

"Don't worry, Mr. Potter, the Headmaster will sort this out," Sprout said, before heading to the fireplace and calling, "Headmaster's Office!" She disappeared in a flash of green flame.

O o O o O

A/N: Well, things are really diverging from canon now, as they should with the changes Severus has made. I have often wondered why so many time travel fics have their time traveler leave Quirrell alone. I mean, really, who in their right mind would willingly allow a man with *Voldemort* at the back of his head remain within a school when they are given an opportunity to do something about it . . . ?

Shrug Just something to think about.

Anyway, thanks so so much for all the reviews ^^

Next part, *The Headmaster's Ire*, is in the works.

The Headmaster's Ire

A/N: I have been asked a few questions several times, so have decided to answer them here:

Questions Concerning:

Ron and Hermione - At this time, I am not sure how much they will impact the overall plot of the story, though, I do have some ideas of how they can get to know Harry. However, for right now, I honestly do not see them becoming as close to him as they were in canon. As things are now, it really wouldn't make sense.

Pairings - My strength in writing is not in pairings, and I do not wish to flounder around in attempting to write them in this story. Also, Harry and his peers really are not old enough to have serious relationships, and if I were to ever write romance it would be of a serious nature, not middle school drama. So, to answer it simply . . . there will be no pairings.

Part 6: The Headmaster's Ire

"Sit down over here, Mr. Potter," Severus instructed, leading him to the black leather chair next to the fireplace. "The Headmaster will be here shortly."

Severus was thinking furiously, trying to manipulate the situation to his liking. He had seen the opportunity presented to him the moment Harry told him about his peculiar headaches and immediately reacted. Now, he was glad he had, for he had just seen the damage the Dark Lord had done to the boy's mind in a mere week's time.

No wonder it had been so hard to teach him Occlumency in fifth year! Harry's mind had been under assault in his first year nearly non-stop when his magic was in its early and fragile stages of development. And then, later, there was what had happened in fourth and fifth year. . . .

Harry's mind had undoubtedly been weakened, and then, on top of that, there was the treatment he had received from the Dursleys. Severus felt like an absolute dunderhead. Of course, in the future, he had realized Harry's mind had suffered under the Dark Lord, making his mastering of Occlumency extremely difficult for him, but it was only now that he fully understood the extent of the mental damage the original Harry had had to overcome.

The respect he had for his young, old friend grew, and a part of him saddened,

knowing he would never see him again — at least, not quite.

Severus looked at the boy before him, finding his bright green eyes full of concern. The sadness in him receded, knowing the Harry he had left would want him to look on the positive side of things, and recognize the chance he had been given to make the future brighter, not only for the Wizarding World, but for Harry and . . . yes, even himself.

"We will stop this from continuing, Mr. Potter," Severus said, deciding he needed to offer some sort of comfort. "You have my word."

That seemed to ease the tension in Harry's shoulders greatly, for which Severus was thankful.

Just then, a green flash came from the fireplace, the colorful Headmaster stepping out with Professor Sprout right behind him.

Severus wished he knew what Dumbledore was thinking just then. It was not every day that a Head of House would come directly to his office and ask him to go with them to the office of another Head of House — let alone Slytherin's.

Severus suddenly wondered what Sprout had told the Headmaster.

"Headmaster," Severus said, bowing his head slightly as he stepped beside the large leather chair, which dwarfed Harry. The boy's feet were dangling over the seat's edge, his tiny frame almost completely hidden behind the armrest and cushioned side panel. It was angled, so it was not directly facing the fireplace.

"Severus, what has happened? Pomona said you just discovered one of her Puffs was being mentally attacked," Albus said immediately, keeping his calm exterior, though his eyes revealed his alarm.

"Yes, Headmaster." Severus turned to Harry, alerting Dumbledore to his presence.

Harry bit his lip as the old wizard turned his blue eyes to him. "Hello, Headmaster," Harry managed, doing his best to imitate Severus' respectful nod.

The potions master could tell Harry was nervous, and, perhaps, in awe of the wizard he had no doubt read about in his self summer studies. Then again, he may have been confusing Harry's expression — it could simply be gratitude, since the headmaster had given him permission to have two pets. Seconds later, Harry proved it was the latter.

"Thanks for allowing me to have two pets, sir. I hadn't been able to thank you properly," Harry said after a moment.

Albus smiled. "It was no trouble, my boy," he said as Coral raised her head and looked up at him.

Harry smiled back shyly as the small snake waved the end of her tail. The old wizard blinked, though his eyes briefly twinkled before he looked to Severus expectantly.

"I don't know how much Professor Sprout was able to tell you, but I have reason to believe someone has been trying to invade Mr. Potter's mind. They have already made a disturbing amount of progress, as Mr. Potter's young mind has no defenses for such attacks."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose, before he looked at Harry worriedly, making no effort to mask his emotions.

"He has been suffering headaches in Defense Against the Dark Arts and occasionally in the Great Hall. Headaches that start at his scar and spread out to the rest of his skull," Severus explained further.

Albus kneeled down on the floor to get to Harry's eye level. "Harry, tell me when this first started and how it felt," he stated.

Harry told him about his first DADA lesson, and then how he began having headaches in the Great Hall too. He told him how the headaches would begin as a dull throb at his scar before growing into a burning pain that encompassed his entire forehead. He said it was always worse in DADA.

Moving forward, the headmaster gazed intently at Harry's scar, slowly lifting his old wrinkled hand before he paused. "May I, Harry?"

"Yes, sir. I understand you're trying to figure this out. I don't want to have these headaches anymore," Harry said honestly.

Albus smiled, before brushing Harry's hair away so he could have a clear view of his scar. He then brushed his thumb over the legendary mark, his blue eyes staring at it intently before muttering a few words Harry couldn't identify, but they were definitely in a foreign language. Latin, if he had to guess.

With the words uttered, a gentle coolness came from the old wizard's thumb and brushed away the growing headache Professor Snape had unavoidably caused. As that happened, Harry watched as the Headmaster's eyes closed in concentration.

Harry glanced to Snape beside him without moving, not wanting to interrupt the Headmaster. He found the dark robed professor intrigued, before he looked to Professor Sprout. She looked anxious and a little concerned as she continued to watch Dumbledore do whatever he was doing.

Harry was certain the Headmaster wasn't doing anything with his mind. He felt no pressure and could sense no presence or growing throb he learned to associate with a mental invasion. Instead, there was an energy dancing across his skin, leaving a tingling sensation on his scar before dissipating with a soft pulse.

With his eyes still closed, Dumbledore patted Harry tenderly on the cheek before lowering his hand. Harry got the strangest impression that the Headmaster was trying to contain his emotions.

"Pomona, inform Minerva and Filius that all students must report to their dormitories immediately and remain there until further notice, no exceptions. Tell the Prefects this is a direct order from me and said order is to be carried out as a lockdown," he said levelly, still not opening his eyes. "Go now."

Pomona gave a nod before disappearing into the fireplace with a green flash.

"Headmaster, if this is what it appears to be, you should not approach him on your own. May I suggest calling the Aurors? Madam Bones can be trusted and her assistance may be needed if this goes to trial," Severus said sagely.

Harry wanted to ask what was going on, but by the look on Severus' face he knew he should remain quiet. Now was not the time to ask what Aurors were or who the Headmaster should not approach on his own. Maybe he would be able to ask later.

"I agree, Severus." He opened his eyes, looking straight at Harry. "Thank you for trusting your Head of House and Professor Snape enough to bring your concern to them and being honest. I cannot tell you how important it was, at least, not yet."

Harry looked down, a little embarrassed with the sentiments.

:He is very angry, Harry. Whatever he learned from touching you . . . he is very angry. His magic is furiously bubbling at his center. I can practically taste it: Coral hissed quietly. :Can you feel it?:

Harry blinked, looking back up at the Headmaster. Yes, he could feel something. It was hot and pulsing very quietly around them. Was this magic? Was this Albus Dumbledore's magic barely being contained and controlled?

"I just wanted the headaches to stop, sir, and I hoped they would be able to help me," Harry admitted.

"Well, just the same. You could have ignored it and hoped the pain would go away," Dumbledore said kindly, before standing up. "I believe it would be best for you to take the floo to your Common Room, Harry. Once you get there, do not leave. Professor McGonagall should be making the announcement soon."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, going to the fireplace where Professor Snape held out a bowl of powder.

"It's floo powder, Mr. Potter. Take a handful, step into the fireplace, clearly state, 'Hufflepuff Common Room,' and throw the powder down. You will then arrive in your common room. Be careful, it can be a rough landing if you are not expecting it," Severus advised.

"Yes, sir." Receiving departing nods from the professors, Harry did as he was told, and disappeared in a flash of green.

O o O o O

The moment Harry was safely away, Albus turned toward Severus, his eyes now a dangerous ice blue. "I had known something wasn't quite right. . . ." He shook his head, his hands forming into tight, angry fists. "Quirrell has been in contact with Voldemort; his magic has been tainted heavily by Tom's dark magic. One way or another, that man will be out of Hogwarts before the day is done."

Severus blinked, not even needing to feign surprise as Dumbledore grabbed a handful of floo and went to his knees, throwing the powder in the fireplace to make a floo-call.

"Department of Magical Law Enforcement!"

Severus watched as Dumbledore spoke adamantly with Madam Bones, the head of the department, quickly giving a brief outline of what was going on. He left out who the Hufflepuff was, but made it quite clear he was furious that it had happened and that he wanted the culprit to be caught and tried under the full force of the law.

Just then, McGonagall spoke over the magical intercoms, informing the students in no uncertain terms to get to their dormitories immediately. Severus was certain no one would be disobeying that order after hearing the stern tone in Minerva's voice.

Focusing back to his mentor, Severus could not hear what Madam Bones was

saying, but got the gist of the conversation simply by listening to Albus' replies.

"I am confident it is Quirinus *Quirrell. I was able to sense the man's magic on the student," he stated flatly, barely containing his outrage. "I have already issued a lockdown and want this to be taken care of immediately. I do not want that man a minute longer than necessary in my castle and near my students!"*

A moment after that statement, he must have gotten the answer he wanted for he was up and heading toward the door. Severus was about to follow when the fireplace flared, spitting out three individuals: Madam Bones, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and a wizard Severus was certain was called Markus Aralium. He was a strong wizard but had unfortunately been killed early on in the war, not long before Hogwarts had fallen.

Madam Bones and the two Aurors quickly fell into step behind Albus, only giving Severus a brief nod as they went.

"He is in his office," Dumbledore stated.

No one questioned how he knew this.

Severus knew it was from being Headmaster. While on the grounds, the Headmaster could ask the magic of Hogwarts to inform him where certain people were, especially if they were suspected of heinous acts.

Going down the hall devoid of all students, they headed to the DADA classroom. Once the door was in sight, they could suddenly feel the power of Albus' magic radiating from him. Severus briefly recalled the exploding bookcase and hoped his mentor had better control of himself this time — though, a morbid part of him did hope to see Quirrell splatter against a wall.

"Do not underestimate him," Dumbledore stated. "I doubt he will come quietly."

He opened the door and took a few steps in, the others entering behind him.

Quirrell was at the front of the room, situating the things on his desk.

"H-headmaster, h-has som-something ha-happened? I-I h-heard P-prof-fessor M-McGonagall ear-earlier." he said. "I-is someth-thing th-the ma-matter?"

Dumbledore came to a stop in the middle of the room, staring quite harshly at the stuttering professor.

Severus shut the classroom door behind him and subtly called his wand into his hand, which was easily hidden by the sleeve of his robes.

"Quirinus, you are to relinquish your wand and leave with Madam Bones and the two gentlemen with her," Dumbledore stated.

"W-what? I-I don't un-understand, He-headmaster," he continued to stutter.

Severus wanted to hex his mouth off.

"You mentally assaulted a student. I will not stand for that and will not permit you to remain on the grounds of Hogwarts, let alone be a professor within her walls. Now leave," Albus stated, his blue eyes flashing angrily.

And that was when the stuttering professor lost his confused and concerned expression.

"I can't do that," he stated, his voice torn between rage and terror.

"KILL THEM!"

The extremely hateful voice had seemingly come from Quirrell himself, but his lips had not moved. However, the Headmaster and Severus both recognized the voice.

Severus acted instinctively just as Quirrell lifted his wand hand toward Madam Bones. Evidently, he was not confident enough to aim for Dumbledore, his closest target.

A green bolt shot toward Madam Bones, only to be intercepted by a table Severus had just summoned to fly in front of her. The table exploded, shards of wood going everywhere, the largest piece slamming into her. It looked painful, Severus thought, but at least she would live.

Albus and Kingsley returned fire, but Quirrell was not Voldemort's host for nothing. He twisted out of the way, weaving his wand around himself as it released a hideous black smoke.

"KILL THEM!" the voice shouted again, this time as a harsh hiss.

"Severus, seal the room!" Dumbledore ordered as he thrust his wand forward and stepped in front of Markus, who was moving to assist Bones.

Severus did as he was told, knowing the black mist was a death warrant for any who touched or breathed it in. They could not allow it to leak into the rest of the school,

no matter the cost. The potions master turned back after casting to see what Dumbledore was doing. He had conjured a bubble and it was absorbing the blackness, its movements being controlled by the Headmaster's free hand.

"KILL!" the voice shouted again.

"I'm trying, Master!" Quirrell answered, his wand spewing the dark mess all around.

But Dumbledore kept at it, not allowing the smoke to come near them, until Quirrell abandoned that route, and moved to cast something else.

"No more of this!" Albus roared, utterly furious, his beard whipping around him as he slammed the tip of his wand into his palm.

KAHBOOM!

Severus and the others were propelled back, the very walls and floor shaking violently from the blast that came from the center of the room. With the resounding boom, the potions master was certain the entire school had felt it. Forcing himself to sit up, he opened his eyes to find the black mist gone and a blue liquid speckling the floor. His eyes widened. Dumbledore had just done Alchemy. Advanced Alchemy.

Moving to get up, he suddenly felt something trickle down from his right ear. Blood. With a wince, Severus realized his eardrum had burst from the sudden pressure difference that had resulted from the reaction. He was certain he was not the only one who had blown an eardrum, but thankfully his left was alright and Madam Pomfrey could heal the right easily enough.

Shaking himself, he looked to where Albus had last been, only to find his mentor still standing boldly in front of Quirrell, who was back against his desk.

"You cannot stop the Dark Lord," the no longer stuttering man said.

Albus said nothing, but narrowed his eyes and tilted his wand ever so slightly.

"He will return! And he will kill the Potter Brat!" Quirrell ranted, any hint of a sound mind completely gone now.

"Yessss, I will," the voice agreed.

Kingsley and Markus were frozen on either side of Bones, who was just now opening her eyes. Severus was on the other side of the room, closest to the door. Dumbledore remained where he had been, in the middle of the room, blocking

Quirrell's escape.

"Stop hiding, Tom," Albus stated flatly, flicking his wand sharply to the side and causing Quirrell's turban to unravel.

Quirrell gasped and tried to stop it, but he was too slow. Madam Bones and her two Aurors had a clear view of his master from where they were.

"Voldemort . . ." Madam Bones breathed. Kingsley and Markus were speechless.

"Yesss, you ssseee? I am not dead . . . I cannot die . . ." he said, making Quirrell turn his head so he could better look at them.

Just as his hideous face was fully facing them, Quirrell faltered, his legs giving out from under him.

"M-master!" Quirrell cried. "I-I can't f-feel my legs!"

"You fool!" Voldemort screeched.

"You poisoned yourself, Quirinus," Albus stated, his eyes shining with his magic. "You should have been more careful when you had been casting. The Black Death is spreading throughout your body right now."

"No!" he gasped as his body continued to fail, making him crumple against the side of his broken desk.

"Old man," Voldemort said, no longer caring about the state of Quirrell as he made eye contact with Dumbledore. "I will return, just wait. Nothing will prevent me from doing so."

"And so I will remain here, in your way," Albus replied. "Nothing will move me."

Voldemort sneered, before his incorporeal self rose from Quirrell's now motionless body. Dumbledore responded by throwing several bright spells from his wand, which immediately resulted in Voldemort's quick departure. . . .

O o O o O

Severus leaned back in his leather chair, grateful the hectic day was done.

Madam Bones had spoken to the Wizengamot and had given them her report about Voldemort and Quirrell. She had even given her memory about it. Kingsley and Markus were quick to offer theirs as well, but it was not needed.

The Wizarding World was in for a shock the next morning, he was certain about that. Thanks to Madam Bones' backing of Albus Dumbledore, the entire Wizengamot accepted the fact that the Dark Lord was not completely gone. This, understandably, resulted in votes of setting up higher security within the Wizarding World and providing Hogwarts the means to place more powerful wards, which Albus had requested many times in the past, but had been turned down due to the belief that such precautions were unnecessary and overkill.

Well, it definitely wasn't unnecessary or overkill now.

Severus whirled the liquid in his glass, trying to calm himself.

The only unfortunate thing in all of this, besides the light structural damage (from Albus' Alchemic spell), Quirrell's demise, their burst eardrums (which Pomfrey immediately fixed when they came to her), was the fact the improved wards would not be able to be placed until the summer holidays. It would take several weeks to place the runes and stones on and around the grounds, and then another week to fully activate the new and improved wards on top of the old ones.

Severus wished they could place them sooner, but it could not be helped. However, there was solace in knowing that once the wards had been placed, harmful objects (such as that accursed diary) would not be able to enter the walls of Hogwarts. Such items would immediately be detected and quarantined, until released and taken by the Headmaster. This sort of ward information was only privy to the Heads of Houses and the Headmaster himself.

Severus smirked.

Lucius would fail much sooner this time.

But Severus quickly shook himself. He could not allow himself to get ahead of the present. He was changing things; so much of the future was already null and void. He had to be cautious and very vigilant. Which reminded him, he needed to speak with Draco soon, and make sure things were developing there as they should. He did not want a Lucius Jr., and did not want Draco to suffer what he had last time . . . agonizing regret.

O o O o O

The Wizarding World was in a state of shock. The Wizengamot had just disclosed the events that had transpired on Friday.

The fact Voldemort had been on the back of Quirrell's head was not quite made

public knowledge. However, what the public did know included how Quirrell was caught, the fact he was a devout follower of the Dark Lord, and that he had been host to the spirit of You-Know-Who, who was not quite as dead as they had believed.

Some people didn't know what to think, but many others believed. To them, it was enough that the Wizengamot had ruled it true, and enough that the Ministry was taking action against the not-so-dead Dark Lord.

One thing was certain, however, no one could question Albus Dumbledore's devotion to and protection of his students. As soon as they had been able, the students of Hogwarts wrote home, telling their families of the large explosion they had heard and how it had rocked the entire castle. That same day, at the Wizengamot, Dumbledore gave a statement, saying he was the one who had caused the blast, and that it was during the duel with Quirrell. He did not go into detail, but later the Aurors reported that Madam Pomfrey had healed the Headmaster's eardrums, as well as those of the others who had been present, and that she said that the Headmaster told her he had needed to perform alchemy to combat the Black Death spell, which Quirrell had cast.

With that news, the press went crazy, speculating about how grand the duel had been and how the Headmaster of Hogwarts had stood against evil once again, protecting his students.

Dumbledore was not present to comment.

O o O o O

The weekend passed in a blur. The school was all hyped on what had happened and how Aurors had gone through the school soon after it had happened to search for any other evidence and to take quotes from professors. The only thing the students knew for sure was that the ex-professor had mentally assaulted a Hufflepuff student, and that that student had been wise enough to report the odd feeling to their Head of House who was then able to bring the student to the Headmaster.

Of course, rumors of who that student was ran rampant. A few people believed it had been Cedric Diggory, since he had been called after class for something earlier that week in DADA, but he denied having anything to do with what had happened. Others thought it was Harry Potter because, well, he was the boy-who-lived and would be the obvious target of an agent of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry pulled a Cedric and denied it as well, especially after hearing the whole story from Professor Snape.

"Mr. Potter, I trust you will keep what I have told you to yourself," he stated after

giving a blunt overview of what had transpired after Harry had left his office Friday. "Although you may disclose these things to Mr. Longbottom, if you must."

"Of course, sir." Harry shivered, despite being next to the fireplace in Snape's office. "He really had him at the back of his head?"

"Yes, which is why I believe your scar reacted the way it had. Being an old injury from him, it is sensitive to his magic."

"So when he tried getting in my head . . . ?" Harry asked, before biting his bottom lip in unease.

"Correct. Which brings me to the other reason I asked you here." Severus pulled a book from one of the bookcases on the side wall and handed it to Harry. "I want you to begin reading this. It is not particularly crucial you finish it before the end of term, as you have more pressing priorities, like school work, but I felt you would appreciate having it at your disposal."

Harry looked down at the cover and read, 'The Art of Occlumency: One's Mental Defense.' His eyes widened as his hand moved over the bindings. "Thank you, sir."

"Reading this will not protect you yet. For that, you will need personal instruction in Occlumency, which is explained in detail within."

"Are you going to teach me?" Harry asked suddenly, bringing the book closer to himself. Coral's tongue flicked over the book's title.

"Perhaps, but your magic must be a bit more mature than it is right now. Teaching you this too early can hamper your development, and as you still have to overcome the block and previous treatment from the Dursleys, I feel it would be unwise to begin serious instruction of this before your third year."

Harry's shoulders slouched a little, but he understood what the professor was saying.

"Okay, so you're giving me this to read to get me ready for when I do learn it?"

"Yes. The book will help prepare you for future instruction, as well as help you begin the process of building up defenses. However, it is no substitute for real training."

"I understand, sir. Thank you."

"One other thing, Mr. Potter. Do not read that in the open. It is . . . not quite a book

that is widely accepted. Some argue it is a side door into the Dark Arts. Granted, it can make one interested in the offensive side of the mind, Legilimency, but that in and of itself is hardly Dark. After all, it is how one uses magic that makes it good or evil."

"So Voldemort used Legil . . ."

"Legilimency," Severus supplied.

"Yeah, he used that on me?"

"He did, but then I had used it to discover what was happening. Do you see now, Mr. Potter?"

Harry tilted his head. "I think so, sir."

"Very good; however, if you have questions, don't stop yourself from asking me. I will always be honest with you, Mr. Potter. I may not always be able to tell you everything, but what I do say will always be the truth."

"Okay, Professor. Um, I will always be honest with you too," Harry answered.

"And that is all I expect in return, Mr. Potter," he said, his black eyes holding a rare softness.

O o O o O

Harry entered Potions on Monday, still feeling a little overwhelmed with everything that had happened. He had told Neville what had occurred in Professor Snape's office, and what Dumbledore had said and done. He also gave a short summary of what Snape had told him about Quirrell.

It was all very strange. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Quirrell had played host to Voldemort's spirit, and the more he thought about it, the more grateful he was to Neville and Coral for convincing him to go to the professor. He knew it had likely saved his mind, maybe even his life.

He sat down in the seat he had claimed as his own. Neville sat beside him.

They hadn't been able to visit Hagrid during the weekend because of the Auror investigation that commenced, but had sent him a note with Hedwig that they would try to visit him the following weekend.

"We should be learning about the uses of Rosemary today," Neville whispered. "I

wonder if he'll discuss its uses with other plants."

Harry shrugged, looking forward to the lesson himself. He was hopeful that lessons would bring things back to how they had been earlier the previous week. He just wanted to get past what had happened and his place in it all. He wanted to get back to working hard and learning about magic.

Harry's wish was granted, and as the day continued, talk of Quirrell became more scattered and less rampant. The students went back to talking about lessons and spreading pointless rumors about who liked who and what so and so had done during the crazy weekend. Talk about flying lessons also surfaced. They would be held for all houses later that week, on Thursday.

Entering DADA, Harry was hopeful the week would continue without incident.

"Are you sure he's not just hiding in our dorm room?" a boy asked the red haired boy.

"Yes, he's not anywhere," Weasley muttered sorrowfully. "I've looked everywhere. I don't know where he is. He's just disappeared."

"I'm sure your pet will show up, Ron. I mean, that Longbottom boy's pet is said to disappear all the time, and he comes back."

Weasley sighed. "I hope so."

Harry felt for the boy. He didn't know what he would do if Coral or Hedwig went missing. He hoped Weasley would find his pet soon, even though it was a rat.

"Good morning," the Headmaster greeted the first year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students with a smile as he stepped into the room. "I will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts until a more permanent replacement can be found." Dumbledore looked at them all, pausing ever so briefly on Harry.

The students were staring at him in awe. No one had told them the Headmaster would be filling in for DADA.

"Well, I think a practical demonstration may be beneficial today. Two volunteers, please?" he asked.

Immediately, a dozen hands flew up. Harry spotted Granger as one of them, as well as most of the Gryffindors. Only a few Hufflepuffs raised their hands. Harry and Neville did not.

"Ah, Ms. Bones and Mr. Thomas. Thank you," he said, motioning them up to the front of the room. "Now, today we are going to work on a simple defensive spell that is still often used by aurors. The wand motion is like so." He demonstrated, showing it to them from several different angles. "Once you have cast it a few times, the wand movement is not as vital, and you can learn to cast it silently with practice."

Many of the students 'ooo'ed at that.

"The incantation is 'Expelliarmus'," he continued, pronouncing it clearly. He then had them repeat it after him. "Very good. Now, Ms. Bones, I would like you over here," he said, silently casting something that placed pillows and padding on the walls behind her before doing the same behind Thomas. Making sure there was nothing near to hurt them, he nodded. "Face each other and cast when you are ready."

Dean Thomas looked at Susan Bones, both of them straightening as they got ready to cast at each other.

Feeling they were both ready, they cast, trying to move their wands correctly while saying the incantation.

Dean's spell veered off course, hitting the wall behind Susan just as Susan's spell left her wand. It hit Dean in the elbow and caused his wand to fly up into the air.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore congratulated. "Both of you, you have done well for that being your first try. Mr. Thomas, work on your aim and you will be marvelous. Ms. Bones, work on your speed and you will be a difficult opponent."

Pleased with the praise, they both beamed.

"Now, I would like the rest of you to pair up and do just what they had," he instructed as all of the walls became padded. When the students left their desks, the desks vanished and their bags moved to the far end of the room.

"Wow," Harry breathed, fascinated with the magic before turning to Neville.

"Ready, Harry?" he asked nervously, wand in hand and in position.

Harry nodded with a smile. With that, they cast the spell, or, in Neville's case, tried to.

Neville stumbled back and fell as his wand landed beside Harry. Harry hurried to his friend.

"Neville, are you okay?" he asked.

Neville nodded, embarrassed. "Yeah, the floor's cushioned too."

Getting up, Neville looked up to find the Headmaster stepping beside Harry. Neville silently decided Dumbledore could be a daunting figure if he wanted to be, for the way he was currently standing beside Harry, he no longer looked like the dotting head of the school. Neville was reminded that this was the wizard who had listened to Professor Snape and had taken down the stuttering professor who had fooled them all.

"Alright there, my boy?" Dumbledore asked, helping him up.

"Yes, professor," Neville managed with a heavy swallow.

"You were holding your wand too tightly, Mr. Longbottom," he said lightly, before holding out his hand back to where Neville's wand was and calling it to himself. He then handed it to Neville, who was now wide-eyed at seeing wandless magic. "Here, let me help you," he said, moving to stand behind him.

Neville just blinked before looking at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, please return to your previous position and cast again when you are ready."

Harry nodded and hurried back.

The other students had stopped practicing and were now curiously watching.

Dumbledore was standing right behind Neville and had his hand over Neville's right, which was holding the wand.

"Loosely now. Your wand is not a sword to be swung, but a brush to stroke on a canvas," the old wizard said.

Neville nodded, before beginning to cast, Dumbledore's hand helping guide the motion.

"*Expelliarmus*!" Neville shouted, just as Harry did the same.

Two wands clattered to the floor soon after, having flown from the hands of their owners.

"Well done," the Headmaster said, before looking to the other students and causing

them to get back to practicing.

Neville and Harry were smiling broadly at each other as they prepared to do it again.

After the lesson ended, all of the students were thinking the same thing. Albus Dumbledore was definitely a better teacher than Quirrell. They also privately hoped it would be a long time before a replacement was found.

O o O o O

Severus opened his door, allowing Draco to enter.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Draco asked, a little uncertain with why he had been told to come to his godfather's quarters after dinner.

"Yes, I did, Draco," he said, using his first name to let him know he was there as his godson, not his student.

The boy smiled softly and looked a little more at ease as Severus motioned him to sit down at his couch.

His outer quarters, which was where they were, was open to his Slytherins, though only if they felt they needed to speak with him about something. It was not a study area or a place to relax. It was a place to talk.

"I see you have made at least one friend outside of your house," he began lightly.

"If you're talking about Potter, Godfather, maybe."

Severus gave Draco a rare small smile. "I am glad to hear that."

Draco blinked, not exactly surprised but uncertain. "You are?"

A few of the Slytherins snickered when they learned he was friends with Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived who had been sorted into the house of left-overs.

"Mr. Potter would be fortunate to have a friend like you beside him, just as you would be to count him as one of your friends."

"So, he will be a strong wizard?" Draco asked, his trained mind going back to the things his father had told him about gaining useful allies and 'friends'.

Severus narrowed his eyes, just enough to show Draco he did not approve of where his thoughts were going.

"Whether he will be or not is immaterial. What I am telling you is that your friendship could be very powerful, and no, I am not referring to a friendship that would bring you power in the things your father talks of, but in something much more everlasting."

Draco's eyes widened.

"What I am talking about is a genuine friendship, one where he trusts you implicitly, and you return that trust equally."

"You mean, like I would trust my life to him, and he would trust his life to me?"

"Yes, and even the lives of others, if need be."

Draco frowned. "What are you saying, Sev?" he asked, using the nickname he had given him as a toddler.

Severus knew he had to tread carefully here. He had to remind himself Draco was still only a child, and not the adult he had left. He did not know the horrors of war and of death, did not know the cost of betrayal or failure, nor the salvation held within true mercy and forgiveness.

"I know it will be difficult for you to understand right now, but I need you to trust me and keep the things I tell you to yourself. I am putting my trust in you that you will do this," he said, looking Draco in the eyes.

"Yes, Godfather."

"Including from your father, Draco. For his protection and for yours," he stated very seriously.

Draco swallowed, nodding. After the years of knowing Severus, Draco had learned the man's words were better than his father's, and that the things he said should be heeded.

"What has this to do with my friendship with Potter, though?" Draco questioned after a moment.

"Your father will only see how Potter can be used. He will not see the true benefits of a real friendship. I trust you understand the nature of your father in that regard."

Draco nodded sagely at that. He often wondered why his father was the way he was. Why he had no friends, only 'allies' and 'useful workers'. Sure, he used the word

'friend', but it did not hold the real meaning.

"You can grow to become a better man than your father, Draco. You can grow to become a better man than myself. You just have to realize sooner than I have where true power lies."

"I think I understand, Godfather."

"I hope you do, Draco. My greatest wish is that you will become all you should be. I do not only wish for you to become a great wizard, but to be a great and, yes . . . even a kind man all people can respect."

Draco tilted his head. "Has something happened? Is it why you are telling me this?"

"I have discovered some things."

"Is it because of Quirrell and You-Know-Who?"

Severus fought back a sigh. Draco really was an inquisitive child.

"That is only part of it."

"But you can't tell me more," Draco gathered, a little bummed.

"Not right now."

"But you will tell me someday, won't you?" he asked, suddenly earnest.

Severus smiled sadly. "I hope . . . someday." And he really did.

"Okay," Draco said, not really knowing what to think about this conversation, but content in doing what his godfather had said.

Sev had never steered him wrong . . . unlike his father.

O o O o O

A/N: Well, this is the first time I have received over 500 reviews before the 6th part. O.O Wow. Thanks so much for the reviews ^^ They have really helped feed my muse!

The next part, *Healing*, is in the works.

Healing

A/N: I have been asked a few questions several times, so have decided to answer them here:

Questions Concerning:

Harry's Development - I've had several people express their concerns over Harry possibly not growing in experience since Quirrell has been removed and he now has Severus to turn to for help. Let me put such fears/worries to rest. Harry will endure hardships, but, unlike last time, he will have better preparation and will actually be able to grow more than he would have otherwise because he has proper support. Rest assured, I have taken the changes Severus has made into account and know a hero cannot hope to become a true hero if he doesn't actually do anything. Harry will not be idle in this story.

Part 7: Healing

Severus was pleasantly surprised and amazed how quickly the student population got over the whole Quirrellmort escapade. He supposed the saying 'out of sight, out of mind' was true. Without something to remind them what had happened, they moved on, going back to trivial things, like who had said what, and what so-and-so had decided to wear that day.

He was glad children were like that.

The staff, unfortunately, was not.

"Are we sure he won't try something else?" Minerva asked.

They were having an informal meeting. It was Wednesday night.

"We cannot be sure, Minerva, which is why we will not be changing anything we have already done and set up," Albus answered.

"Oh, I am grateful we decided on the Fidelius," Filius said.

"As am I," Severus muttered quietly.

"Well, the wards will be improved this summer, I have the Board's assurance they will allow and provide the funds for it at our earliest convenience," the Headmaster said, moving things along.

"About time. Even without the threat of You-Know-Who, it has been too long since the wards have been strengthened," Minerva sniffed.

"Yes, but we will not be merely strengthening them, but adding to them," Filius piped in.

"Has it been decided what will be added exactly?" Pomona asked, speaking up.

"I have some ideas, besides simply strengthening the existing wards, but would like your thoughts on the matter before I share mine," Albus said, looking at them all.

Before he could stop himself, Severus spoke up. "Anti-disguise wards, including ones that would detect animagi and polyjuice use."

"Yes, I agree," Filius said, quickly understanding the merits of such a precaution as Severus internally relaxed.

He had not spoken too suddenly.

"Very well," Albus said, jotting that down on a sheet of parchment before him.

"Hmm, perhaps anti-portkey, to prevent any unauthorized departures from Hogwarts?" Pomona asked.

"Yes, but have incoming portkeys made by you or an authorized professor be allowed," Minerva added.

Dumbledore nodded, writing that down as well.

They sat in silence for a time, thinking about any weaknesses Hogwarts had. They were like that for a good solid minute, all of them trying to think of how else to improve the wards.

Severus was thinking furiously on how to add another ward he desperately wanted in place without once again drawing attention to himself.

"Dementors," he whispered to himself.

"What was that, Severus?" Albus asked.

Severus forced himself not to look up suddenly in alarm. Instead, he slowly looked at Dumbledore with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Dementors. I was just running through all the allies the Dark Lord would have if he

were to return to his former strength. If we are creating the wards for a worse-case-scenario, then having wards against them would be wise. And, now that I think about it, why not a ward alerting you to any who have a dark mark?"

"But the Dementors are under Ministry control," Filius pointed out.

"Have the words 'Ministry' and 'control' ever gone well together?" Minerva retorted.

Dumbledore stroked his beard and looked at Severus intently.

"It is merely a suggestion, Headmaster," Severus stated.

"A very curious one," Albus replied, still looking at Severus thoughtfully. "As well as a wise one."

Severus decided to try a new tactic and looked down a little, as if hesitant. He wanted to divert the Headmaster's suspicions away from wherever they had been heading. "From what has recently happened . . . I believe we should prepare for anything. It . . . *frustrates* me that a man like Quirrel was able to . . . trick us. I would feel more secure in knowing we are better equipped to protect Hogwarts from anything the Dark Lord may be able to use, no matter how improbable."

Dumbledore continued to stare at Severus for a moment, before nodding his head, understanding where his spy was coming from now. "I agree, Severus. Perhaps if we had been as observant and cautious the previous incident would not have occurred."

Severus mentally let out a sigh of relief. Crisis averted, for now.

O o O o O

Harry and Neville joined the other first years outside for their first flying lesson. Many of them were excited and wanted to fly already, while poor Neville, was scared out of his mind.

"You'll do fine, Neville," Harry assured. "The teacher is here and won't let anything happen."

"I'm accident prone, Harry. Nothing will save me."

"Oh, stop being so dramatic, Longbottom," Draco said, coming up beside them. "You're not going to die. Just do what you're told and you'll be fine." He was actually sounding reassuring — or trying to be.

Neville and Harry shared a brief look. Was Draco actually being nice . . . to Neville?

Not that he had exactly been mean to him; he had just snubbed him a bit and otherwise ignored him. Maybe Draco hadn't meant to be like that before. Maybe he had been nervous about beginning school and wasn't as mindful to others unless they had his curiosity, like Harry. Maybe?

"Th-thanks, Malfoy," Neville managed.

Draco waved the apology off and looked to Harry. "Your father was a chaser for Gryffindor, did you know that?"

Harry's eyes widened. "He was? Wow."

"Yeah," he answered as Madam Hooch motioned for them to get beside a broom.

Neville remained beside Harry, who was also beside Draco. Vince and Greg were on the other side of Draco.

After hearing the directions and managing to finally get their brooms into their hands, they were ready to fly.

"On my whistle—three—two—one—" Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and most everyone hovered.

After a few moments of that, she gave a nod and said they were allowed to slowly fly if they wished.

"Neville, why aren't you trying?" Harry asked, since Neville had yet to even get off the ground.

"Sorry, Harry, y-you go ahead. I need a moment to collect myself."

"Okay, Neville."

With that, Harry began flying around, but he continued to watch Neville below him, who was too nervous to even mount his broom properly. Every time he tried, he would stumble and almost fall over.

Harry went back down and landed beside him. "Neville, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Harry, but seeing you all flying . . . I can't help but imagine myself zooming up and then falling. I really don't like heights," he admitted, for the fourth time that day.

"Well, just take it slow and try," Harry encouraged.

Madam Hooch was helping some Gryffindors improve their grips a dozen yards away, but had begun making her way to assist Neville.

Neville sighed, his hands trembling as they tried to keep hold of the broom.

Draco suddenly flew down and landed beside him before grabbing hold of Neville's broom. "Here, Longbottom, Potter and I will show you," Draco said. "Let me use your broom. I'll show you you have nothing to worry about."

Hesitantly, Neville allowed Draco to switch brooms with him. Harry looked at Draco, wondering if his plan would work. He did appreciate the effort he was making though, whether or not it actually helped.

"Well, Longbottom, you're going to have to get on the broom you know," Draco said teasingly, but not too harshly.

Neville did as he was told after receiving a nod from Harry.

"Alright, we'll lift off together, nice and easy," Harry said.

One the count of three, they all kicked off.

Neville and Harry succeeded in hovering, whereas Draco suddenly zoomed up and away.

"Ahhhh!" Draco couldn't help but cry at the sudden acceleration.

Hearing the distress in the young Slytherin's voice, Harry immediately shot after him.

"Draco!" Harry yelled, pushing the broom to fly faster to catch up.

"HHHEEEELLP!" he screamed. "IT WON'T STOP!"

:Go, Harry!: Coral urged, the wind rushing across her colorful scales, Harry's robes flapping wildly.

Harry didn't know what to do, but prayed Draco would be able to hang on long enough for him to get close enough to help. He thought about pulling out his wand, but quickly decided against it. He didn't really know any spells that would help, and he didn't want to do something that might hurt Draco or make the situation worse.

"Hold on, Draco!" Harry yelled, before gasping loudly as he realized Draco was heading straight at one of the towers of Hogwarts. "TURN, DRACO, TURN!"

"IT'S NOT LISTENING! HEEELP!" Draco bellowed, trying all he could to turn the broom, but to no avail.

CRASH!

Harry didn't stop when he saw Draco collide violently into the stones, didn't slow when he saw the broom shatter into the wall, and didn't blink as Draco's body crumpled and began to fall. He remained on course, his magic forcing the broom to fly faster than its creators had designed possible.

"HOLD ON!" he yelled, never minding the fact Draco probably couldn't hear him as his body continued to fall.

Suddenly, Harry was there and immediately wrapped his right arm around Draco's limp form.

"I've got you," Harry said, the second boy's weight making the intact broom strain in the air as Harry slowed Draco's descent.

Harry quickly took in Draco's condition, easily determining the boy's right arm had been broken where he had tried to slow his impact with the wall, but that was not the most grievous injury. No, it was Draco's face.

:Coral! Coral, tell me everything you can sense!: Harry hissed, bordering on hysterical.

Madam Hooch and a few disobedient first years were currently making their way to them, but Draco and Harry had flown a long way.

:He's still alive, but his life-force is thready. His magic is trying to help him, but. . . .: Coral didn't finish that sentence and moved on. :His head is hurt very badly. His magic is gathering there, trying to heal, but the damage. . . .:

Harry was breathing heavily now, taking in the blood pouring from the side of Draco's head and from the large gash on his right cheek. His eye on that side was already beginning to swell shut, and it looked like his cheek bones were uneven. Harry cringed as they continued to float down. He was certain Draco had fractured, if not broken facial bones.

Adrenaline still pumping and magic buzzing in his ears, they landed after what felt like minutes of descent, but what was really mere seconds.

Crouching down beside Draco as he gently laid him down, Harry didn't hesitate as

he pulled off his Hufflepuff robe and carefully began wiping the blood from Draco's face so he could see where the worse wounds were.

:Get ready, Coral: Harry said as he braced his right hand against the tower wall and took a deep breath.

:I'm ready, Harry. We can't wait. He is already beginning to pull away. I can feel his magic waning now:

Harry nodded as he removed his bloody hand from the wall and placed it behind Draco's neck before leaning over him.

He didn't quite know what he was doing, but it felt right and Coral didn't suggest doing anything different, so he went with it. Closing his eyes, he did his best to recall everything he could remember from the book and what it had said to do with serious injuries. Clenching his jaw, he knew he wouldn't be able to use Draco's magic — he would have to use his own. This would not be like how he had healed Neville. This would be dangerous. But what else could he do? He knew Coral was right. If he did nothing, Draco would die. It was better to try and fail than to stand back and do nothing.

Pulling what he believed to be his magic, he heard Coral hiss approvingly as she uncurled herself a little from his wrist and allowed her bottom scales to touch Draco's injured face. Encouraged, Harry continued drawing his magic.

Neither of them heard Madam Hooch's cries of, 'Get back, Mr. Potter, get back!' as she hurried to them, finally within earshot, or of Neville's cries to Hooch, 'Let him help! Let him help!' as he got directly in her way.

They were too focused, which was just as well.

:Breaks and tears, mend; cuts, close; wounds, heal!: Harry bellowed, pushing as much magic as he could into his right hand and then into Draco's head and neck in what he hoped was a more controlled fashion.

Coral glowed brightly, and her scales became hot around his wrist. So hot, in fact, a part of him wanted to pull her off, but he didn't. He could and would endure, because he knew Draco was currently unable.

Harry opened his eyes, watching the gash on the Slytherin's cheek and the other wound on the side of his head close, not even leaving a scar. And then the swelling around the eye vanished and the hideous bruise disappeared soon after. But Harry knew he was not done. There were still fractures and broken bones to heal. He felt

more than saw the skull fractures heal; the short jolts of bone realigning reached his fingertips resting against the back of Draco's head. It was both disturbing and relieving. It was actually working.

Harry didn't stop pouring his magic, even when he felt Draco stiffen and saw him open his eyes.

Lowering his left hand onto Draco's almost healed face, careful with the still shattered cheek, Harry continued to guide his magic.

:Heal: he whispered.

And then he saw the cheek bone under newly healed flesh shift back into its correct position with a muffled pop. Draco screamed, but his scream was short lived as he gasped at the sensation of his own magic surging back into him.

Harry took that as a sign to pull his hands away and place them on the twisted arm, oblivious to the gaping crowd now gathering a distance behind him.

:Stop, Harry: Coral suddenly said, squeezing his raw wrist.

Harry looked at her, confused, blinking away the darkness that was creeping around the corners of his eyes.

:His arm though: Harry argued, motioning to the slightly twisted limb.

:You've done what was needed. The nurse can heal the rest: Coral advised. :I will not allow you to harm yourself needlessly:

Harry frowned, before suddenly swaying, wondering why his head felt so light and his arms so heavy.

"Harry!" Neville cried, his face appearing right beside him as Hooch loomed at Draco's feet. There were other figures around, but Harry was too dazed to recognize who they were.

Attempting to turn toward Neville, Harry ended up collapsing into Neville's uncertain but willing arms. Soon after, his eyes closed and darkness claimed him. He didn't even feel himself being lifted up by a pair of soft arms.

O o O o O

"Remarkable," Albus whispered.

Severus gave a brief nod as he continued to look at Harry, sleeping in the same bed he had often claimed in the future, if Severus recalled correctly.

Draco's parents had just left. They had been understandably alarmed upon hearing their son had been hurt in an accident and had immediately come to the school. They were horrified to hear what injuries Draco had suffered, but had grown confused when they saw Draco was already well on his way to a full recovery.

Severus took over from Pomfrey in talking to them, briefly telling them it was Harry Potter who had healed their son and saved his life. He informed them that Pomfrey would not have made it in time to repair the damage done and stop the hemorrhaging. Draco would have succumbed to his injuries if it hadn't been for the Parselmouth Hufflepuff.

Narcissa had clearly been beyond grateful, and though Lucius was relieved his son had lived, Severus knew he was troubled. His son now had a life debt to Harry Potter, of all people, and so, that also meant the Malfoy family was indebted to Harry.

The potions master knew Albus was a bit pleased with that, and, if he was honest with himself, so was he. However, he had other things on his mind than the consequences of Harry saving Draco's life.

He continued looking at Lily's son, well aware that the Headmaster was watching both him and Harry. Coral hissed quietly, still curled around Harry's wrist despite Pomfrey's misgivings.

"He will need real training," Severus stated after a long moment.

They were alone in the infirmary; well, they were the only two conscious wizards anyway. Harry and Draco were sleeping soundly, and with the light spells Severus had placed, they wouldn't be hearing anything if they happened to wake.

"Yes, a talent as strong as his should not be left unpolished," Dumbledore agreed with a nod. "But unfortunately, there are not any other sound parselmouths around to teach him."

"Then I suggest practice."

The Headmaster turned to face him fully. "What are you exactly suggesting, Severus?"

"Give him the opportunity to teach himself, allow him to improve himself — here," he said, pointing to the infirmary floor. "Pomfrey will be able to prevent any serious harm

from occurring, though with his natural skill in magic, I believe the only one who will need to be monitored is Mr. Potter himself, as it's clear he doesn't know when it is time to stop and has to be told to by his familiar, Coral."

"'A natural skill in magic,' Severus?" Albus asked, raising an eyebrow, his interest clearly spiked.

Severus wanted to kick himself in making such a slip. And of course it had to be his mentor who had heard it and immediately caught it. He should have said, 'natural skill in *healing* magic.' He forced himself not to show any outward evidence of self annoyance. He had to think quickly here. What should he do? Deflect Dumbledore's suspicions? What would be sufficient to fill his mentor's curiosity? Suddenly, he knew the answer; he only hoped it wouldn't backfire.

"I had. . . ." He allowed himself to trail off. He had to do this right. He had to appear hesitant enough to draw in Dumbledore's concern, but not too much to make him wary of whatever he was about to reveal.

"Yes, Severus?" the old wizard prompted, as if speaking to a frightened child.

Severus wanted to smirk triumphantly; instead, he turned his face away and looked at Harry's sleeping form.

"When I had taken Mr. Potter to get his school things, we began . . . talking, discussing the classes he would attend and such." Severus continued to avoid eye contact, as if he was a little nervous about what Albus' reaction would be to what was about to say. "Well, he had asked me if I knew what he would be bad at, because I had suggested he might do well in Potions. With his question, I saw an opportunity. Admittedly, I was also curious, and, as he had specifically asked, I saw no harm in indulging it. Even now, I believe it was for the best," he said, now staring at a slumbering Coral, whose head was tucked in between Harry's thumb and forefinger.

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked, his voice revealing slight worry for his former student.

"I know it has been made forbidden, cast out of all spell books since the time you were a child, but it has its benefits, Headmaster. And I believe, in this instance, the benefits far outweigh the bad history."

Dumbledore frowned, trying to follow what his potions master was saying.

Severus sighed, as if he was heaving this secret from his mind and to his lips.

"I cast the Legacy Spell on him, Headmaster."

There was a lengthy pause. Severus couldn't even hear his mentor breathing.

"Did you inform Harry that you cast it?" Albus asked after a long moment.

"Yes, and I asked him to keep that bit of information to himself. I also told him I would talk to him about his abilities when he was ready. He accepted."

"You have taken a big risk, Severus. If anyone within the Ministry were to learn what you have done. . . ." Albus shook his head. "Where did you learn the incantation anyway?"

Severus tried to look insulted. "Really, Headmaster, anyone with a basic knowledge of Latin could figure it out. One just has to know it exists and cast it with a purpose."

"And what purpose did you cast it with?" Dumbledore asked softly. It wasn't an accusation, but a mere question.

"To learn the limit of Mr. Potter's potential," Severus answered after a brief pause.

Albus blinked. "And this . . . potential, what did you learn about it?"

Severus turned his eyes away from Harry and met the older man's eyes, trying to decide how best to answer that. He was getting into dangerous territory here, but perhaps it was best to alert Dumbledore of what awaited Harry — what he would become capable of. Of course, Severus wouldn't reveal having knowledge of the future, that would be insane, but maybe showing he knew more than what he had been saying before would fit into his plans?

"The Dark Lord was correct in . . . being wary of the boy," he stated.

"How so?"

"He is a slumbering Mage."

Dumbledore snapped his eyes to Harry, who was still sleeping soundly with Coral snuggled against him. He was so little in the infirmary bed, so unimposing that it was difficult to imagine such a boy becoming the most powerful type of wizard there is — a wizard so in tune with magic that they are not merely a wielder of it, they are of it.

"And that is just one aspect of his being," Severus added softly.

Albus exhaled slowly.

"I had been . . . reluctant to tell you, not only because of the spell, but because I believed Mr. Potter shouldn't be treated any more differently than he already is, even by you," Severus continued.

"You 'believed,' as in used to?" Dumbledore asked, perplexed, wondering if he had heard Severus correctly.

"Mr. Potter isn't an average student, and he never will be, with or without the idiotic title of 'the-boy-who-lived'."

"Unfortunately, I agree with you. I had hoped to give him a normal childhood with the Dursleys, but I failed. And before he arrived, I had hoped, for his sake, that he would be allowed to be just another student, with nothing attracting more attention to him. But it appears it was just not meant to be." Albus looked at Harry sadly before looking to Snape again. "I will speak to Madam Pomfrey about him assisting her on weekends. If she agrees, I will inform Harry of the arrangement myself, and give him the option of taking advantage of it."

"He will accept," Severus said confidently.

"I am sure he will, but it is nice to be given a choice."

The potions master nodded. "And what of the other things, Headmaster?"

"When he begins showing signs, I will arrange more instruction for him."

"Will you teach him?"

"I may."

"I believe it would be unwise to entrust such a task to anyone but yourself."

"And what of you, Severus? I believe you would be an excellent choice."

"I will be advancing his studies in Potions when the time is right. He is already excelling, far more than I had initially expected," he said, and that was the truth. Who knew a little encouragement and clearly stated expectation would get a child to push themselves as hard as Harry was?

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes."

"What else did you learn from the spell?" Albus asked, deciding to move on.

"As Mages are said to have, he has a number of gifts," Severus said, his voice smooth, as if he was talking about something mundane. "But . . . his body has subconsciously put a lock on his magic. I believe it will lift once he has gained adequate magical control and strength; though, due to the Dursleys, that lift has likely been postponed."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "The potions. They're more than just nutrient potions, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"When do you think you can stop having him drink them?"

"Perhaps as early as the Christmas holidays, but I am not certain yet."

Albus nodded. "What are his gifts?"

"I would rather not say, Headmaster." Severus watched as the old man's eyes narrowed at him. He swallowed, not out of fear or nervousness, but in an attempt to cover his true feelings with how things were going, for he was extremely pleased. He had Dumbledore where he wanted, and had him thinking along the lines he needed him to be.

"Severus. . . ." He was nonthreatening, but his posture was one of a powerful wizard. His magic remained calm, as Snape had expected, but it had a strange feel to it. A searching one, perhaps?

Severus couldn't help but be impressed. Had so much already changed that even Dumbledore was reevaluating himself in how to respond to situations he was inexperienced in?

"Please, Severus. Why has this affected you so?"

Snape blinked. Perhaps his approach was working a bit too well. Well, some more acting should do. He straightened his back. Time to utilize everything he had learned while being a spy.

"I cannot explain how, but I had been given an image of Mr. Potter's potential future through the spell, an image of who he could become."

Albus frowned. Although what Severus was saying was not unheard of (as parents long ago spoke of having a vision of what their child could grow to be if they reached their full potential), it was quite rare. Oh, how he wished he could cast the Legacy

Spell on Harry himself, but the real downside to the spell was that it could only be cast on an individual once. Evidently, an individual's magic was only willing to be read one time.

"I saw a great man, Headmaster," Severus stated, not sure if he should elaborate with a description or not. He didn't know how far he should push this partial lie.

He did have a vision of who and what Harry may become, but it was of his own making. What he hoped Harry would come to be, what he desperately prayed Harry would be.

Dumbledore looked back to Harry, who had shifted in his sleep, oblivious to the world and to their conversation.

"Tell me, Severus," he whispered after a moment.

Severus exhaled slowly, knowing he was really going in deep now, and there would be no going back. What he would say now would further shape Dumbledore's view of Harry and the way he would treat and interact with him.

"I saw him as a wise warrior of peace and a mage surpassing Merlin himself."

Albus stroked his beard, now in deep thought. After a long moment, he spoke, walking closer to Harry's bed, his back to Snape.

"Thank you for being honest with me, Severus. I've made enough mistakes concerning young Harry. I am grateful that you are here to try to prevent me from making anymore." He turned around and faced his potions master, his eyes holding great appreciation. "Perhaps, together, we will help Mr. Potter become what you saw."

"That is my wish, Headmaster. Ever since I was shown what could be, that has been my main objective," Severus stated honestly.

O o O o O

Sprout smiled at her students, appearing as if there was nothing wrong, appearing as if her mind was not on the dozens of other things that really had her attention.

She had just returned from the infirmary and had just finished speaking with the Headmaster about her youngest Hufflepuff. Yes, Mr. Potter was currently the youngest in her house and very near the youngest in the school.

She sat down at her usual spot as Albus stood and motioned for dinner to begin.

Word of what had happened during the first year's flying lesson had already spread like wildfire, and she had already been asked where get-well cards for Harry should be sent. She smiled. Her Hufflepuffs really did look out for one another . . . well, usually.

She mentally shook herself, refocusing on all that Albus had told her.

Harry's magic was partially locked, he was a slumbering mage, and he would likely be helping Pomfrey in the infirmary on weekends after things had settled. Albus had also told her what Harry currently didn't know and what he knew about himself, particularly about him not knowing his slumbering mage status.

To Pomona, it was a bit much to take in, and although she agreed with Dumbledore's plans for the boy's education, she was a bit unsure how to execute it. Harry was a hard worker, that had definitely been made clear by him since he had arrived. Every one of his assignments was already done, according to his classmates, and not only that, but he was studying ahead. Neville was going right along with him, which reminded her of another thing Albus had mentioned.

He would be speaking with Augusta Longbottom about Neville's wand. Evidently, the wand Neville had been given was not a good match for him. Dumbledore had determined that during the DADA lesson earlier that week. Pomona was glad Albus had discovered the problem and was taking care of it. No child should be forced to use an ill-suited wand, particularly a boy who already has confidence issues.

Her eyes fell on Neville currently sitting between Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones. He was worried about Harry and was poking at his mashed potatoes. She saw that a few of the other Hufflepuffs were trying to cheer him up, but it wasn't really helping.

She hoped Harry would be able to leave the infirmary soon, but until Pomfrey had decided he was well, he wouldn't be allowed anywhere. Magical fatigue could be a nasty thing; the only good thing was that he hadn't gone over into exhaustion. That would take at least a week to get over.

"How is Mr. Potter, Pomona?" Minerva asked softly.

"He'll be alright. He just tired himself out a bit," Pomona replied, suddenly being reminded of how she had lifted him up from Neville's trembling arms and carried him to the infirmary herself.

"That is to be expected, after what he had done. You must be very proud of him."

Pomona smiled. "Yes." She glanced over at Severus, who appeared to be deep in thought. She wondered what he was thinking about.

"Has he woken yet?" Filius asked, getting her attention.

"Not yet. Poppy decided it was best to keep him asleep for now," Pomona answered.

Filius nodded in understanding. "It was quite a feat for such a young and inexperienced wizard. I am glad he was able to help young Malfoy."

"He not only helped him, he saved his life," Minerva put in. "His injuries had been quite severe. A moment later and I doubt there would have been anything anyone could have done."

"Merlin," Filius whispered.

Pomona scooped some food onto her plate, silently working out what she would do in the near future with Harry Potter. Albus was right, he needed serious guidance, but she also knew he shouldn't be crowded.

She would need to find a happy medium.

Swallowing, she looked back at Severus, deciding something. The Slytherin Head of House seemed to have the right idea where it came to Harry. Perhaps it was time to really ally herself with him, at least in this.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks again for the reviews ^^

The next part, *Backlash*, is in the works.

Backlash

A/N: I have been asked a few questions several times, so have decided to answer them here:

Questions Concerning:

Mage - An individual so in tune with magic they can manipulate it without any medium (wand) whatsoever. They view magic as a friend, instead of a tool.

Harry's knowledge of Parselmagic - Just a reminder, Harry had been studying fervently for a full month before arriving at Hogwarts. I had figured that much time would move him a bit further than beginner in regards to Parselmagic, if not in the basics of magic as well. I would classify Harry's level upon entering Hogwarts to be an *intermediate* beginner, rather than the *new* beginner he had been in canon or *novice* beginner most purebloods are when beginning Hogwarts.

Legacy Spell - This spell is not dark, it is a taboo because of its bad history. Not even purebloods will use it now because of its stigma. Also, it cannot be cast on the same person twice because that is the nature of its magic. If Dumbledore were to attempt to cast it on Harry, all he would get back would be magic static because Harry's magic had already provided the information to Severus, and it would ignore the second attempt-hence the static.

Super!Harry - I am not trying to make this a super!Harry story, but rather a story where he is adequately motivated and determined to do his best while having the support he should have gotten but didn't in canon. I just wanted to make that clear.

Part 8: Backlash

Dumbledore lowered his hand on the back of Fawkes, lost in his thoughts.

So far, the current term had been the strangest and busiest start of a school year he had experienced. Ever.

Not only had he had to resort to dueling a professor, but he also had contended with a Dark Lord attached to said professor and handled the repercussions of the events surrounding the formerly-believed-to-be-dead Dark Lord becoming public knowledge. It had been hectic, to say the least.

Thankfully, Madam Bones and her two aurors had stood firm and had testified to the

truth. The Wizengamot, and thus the Ministry, could not dispute the memories of several upstanding personnel. He shook his head, recalling Fudge's denial even with the indisputable evidence, which also included Quirrell's body. How that man had been elected was beyond him. However, there was now talk that many people in the Wizengamot and the Board had lost a bit of confidence in Fudge because of his handling of the situation. Dumbledore hoped something would come of that.

Severus was also laying heavily on his mind. Something was different about him, something. . . . But he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was exactly. He was still his potions master and spy, but he was . . . different. He didn't even think Severus himself realized how strange he had been acting lately, and that was what was bothering Albus most.

Severus had always been alert and very aware, but now, when it came to his surroundings, the younger man was downright calculating. He was worse than Mad-Eye in regards to it, at least as far as Dumbledore was concerned. When standing in a room, his back was always to a wall, and when he moved, he moved with a fluid grace that was always efficient and quick. He had never been like that, even when he had been an active spy. Billowing cape, yes, but practically majestic in his movements? No.

Was it from meeting Harry? The magic of the Legacy Spell was Old Magic, and sometimes that magic would bring unforeseen consequences to the caster. Had the magic from the Legacy Spell affected him more than he was saying or more than his spy even knew?

Dumbledore had also noticed the change in the man's teaching methods. There had been a drastic drop of crying first years compared to previous terms, which was downright strange, albeit a pleasant change. A few of the students had also brought the modified lesson plans to the attention of the other teachers'. They weren't drastic alterations, but they were definitely notable. Granted, all of the changes were good for the students, so Albus had no reason to bring up the issue with Severus. He did want to talk to him about it though, and yet, he didn't want to give any sign that he had noticed. Severus was odd that way. He didn't want to have to talk about anything he was doing well. Sometimes that man was so humble it was annoying.

His thoughts strayed back to Harry. When he had first seen him in the Great Hall, he had assumed he would be sorted into Slytherin. Admittedly, Albus didn't want him sorted there, but he knew Severus would be able to watch over him so didn't feel extremely wary about it. He had, however, still hoped the sorting hat would place Harry into his parents' house, no matter how unlikely that obviously was. And then the boy had been sorted into Hufflepuff . . . after sixteen long minutes under the hat.

The longest anyone had taken in the past three hundred years.

The sorting hat had not really been that forth coming when Albus had asked him about Harry's sorting later, after the feast. However, he had said some things that had caught his interest. . . .

"I do not reveal what I find in students' heads, Headmaster, I have told you before," he said, a little smugly.

"I understand that, sorting hat, but you have never asked a student to pace for you to be able to sort them before, not to mention your reactions during the sorting. You hmm'ed and even gasped out loud."

"He was . . . difficult to place at first."

"Why?"

"He has many traits. I had to examine them all carefully to determine which house fit best for him."

"I see. Was there a close second to Hufflepuff?"

"Well, without telling you the particulars, I will tell you that he is the most cunning, rationally brave Hufflepuff I have ever sorted. Also, I don't believe I have ever sorted a soul as determined to do his best as he is."

Dumbledore stared at the sorting hat for a moment, hoping to be told more. The hat sighed at the old man's annoying patience and silent insistence.

"One last thing, Headmaster — you would do well to always be honest and open with the boy. His trust is hard to regain and is very precious."

Albus blinked. "I will . . . keep that in mind. Thank you, sorting hat."

"No problem, Headmaster. Happy to share."

Had the sorting hat known? Dumbledore looked to the top of the shelf where the hat was sleeping. Most likely, especially with that gasp he had made in the middle of the sorting.

The old wizard shook his head and allowed his thoughts to wander once more.

He had already appraised Pomona of the situation, as well as Poppy Pomfrey. They had taken the news quite well, though it was clear it would take time for them to

absorb everything he had told them about Harry. He hadn't told Pomona and Poppy *how* they had learned what they knew about Harry, and they hadn't asked. Albus was sure they had their suspicions, but didn't want to know.

He smiled. He now had quite a team made up devoted in helping Harry, and part of him wondered if that was Severus' plan all along in finally coming clean with him and telling him about the Legacy Spell and what he had seen through it. That man wasn't the Head of Slytherin House for nothing, after all.

And now, he would be going to the infirmary once he had received word Harry was awake to speak with him. He was really looking forward to it, although he wondered what would come of it all, and the more he thought about it, the more concerned he became.

Were they doing right by Harry? Was this really the best course of action? Should they be adding to his 'course load' as they were, taking away part of his weekends to have him improve his parselmagic? Was it fair to have him work even harder than he already was in attempt to reach this 'vision' of Severus'?

Was he, Albus Dumbledore, making another mistake?

Dumbledore shook himself, reminding himself to look at the bigger picture, but then he froze. That was how he had made his previous mistake. He had looked at the bigger picture when placing Harry with the Dursleys.

But this was different, wasn't it?

Fawkes gave a light trill, lifting his spirits and letting him know this was the right path.

"Thank you, my old friend," he whispered, wishing he had listened to Fawkes ten years before, when he had struggled over the decision of where to place Harry.

But he had been too confident, confident that Lily's sister would have a heart and grow to love Harry, thus making the Blood Wards even better than a Fidelius for the boy's protection. But now, they were merely wards. Sure, they were still very strong, and Voldemort would find it impossible to penetrate them, but they were not as strong as they could have been.

They could have been a fortress; they could have endowed Harry with *full* protection against Voldemort *wherever* he went. But his plan had failed. The mental assault Harry had suffered was proof. Voldemort's magic, through Quirrell, had been able to touch Harry — and that would have been impossible if the Blood Wards had been infused with the care-giving love Petunia should have been giving Harry for the past

ten years.

He should have known, but the hope of Harry receiving the ultimate protection against Riddle had blinded him.

Well, one could not change the past. Not really. It was set in stone. And though he wished he could go back and do things differently, his only hope was in the present. A hope that he was helping shape the future into one he would be content, maybe even proud, to leave to the next generation.

Dumbledore straightened. The little indicator on his desk had lit up, letting him know Harry was close to waking.

O o O o O

Harry opened his eyes, feeling like he had just gotten over a very bad cold. He reached over subconsciously to get his glasses from the side table before putting them on.

:You are in the infirmary, Harry. You have been sleeping for a little over two days: Coral said, raising herself up from his arm.

:How is—:

"Good afternoon, Harry."

Harry quickly turned his head from Coral and to who had just spoken. It was the Headmaster. He was robed in bright orange and purple robes. Harry suddenly wondered if the sight of wizards deteriorated with age, dulling vibrant color and making them believe neon orange was really a soft, light brown.

Pushing the mental tangent aside, Harry quickly sat up.

"Draco? Is . . . is he okay?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, he is quite alright, thanks to you. You saved his life."

Harry sagged down with relief and took a few calming breaths.

"He was released this morning, although Madam Pomfrey has ordered him to take things easy for the next few days."

"His arm, I wasn't able to fix that," Harry said.

"Madam Pomfrey took care of it, not to worry," he said soothingly.

Harry relaxed back on the pillows, still feeling a little out of it. Dumbledore took this moment to take a seat on the edge of the bed.

"I have taken the liberty of awarding Hufflepuff one-hundred points while you were asleep for your actions Thursday. You will also be personally receiving an award for services to the school."

Harry's eyes widened. "Uh, thank you, sir, but it really isn't . . . I mean, you don't ha—"

"Harry, I don't think you understand what you have done. You saved a life, and without regard to your own discomforts. Did you know that you arrived in the infirmary with third degree burns on your left wrist where your magic was so concentrated within Coral her scales became as hot as fire? You were so focused on healing young Malfoy that whatever pain you felt at the time was pushed aside."

Harry lifted his arm as Coral slithered onto his chest so he could examine the mentioned wrist.

There was scarring encircling his wrist and going up a little at the back of his palm. Looking closely, he could actually make out the shapes of Coral's scales where they had burned into his flesh.

"Madam Pomfrey tried to minimize the scaring, but as it was a severe magical burn, she wasn't able to heal it as well as she would have liked," Dumbledore continued, his voice subdued as Harry traced the edge of the scarring with his right thumb.

"It's alright. I'm just glad she was able to heal the burn itself," Harry said lightly, finding the scar quite cool.

A part of him was actually proud of it, as odd as that sounded, for he had done something to get it. Granted, this was only his second scar, but it hadn't been given to him; instead, he had, for lack of a better word, *earned* it. All of his other injuries had healed without leaving a mark. Maybe it was his own magic that had healed him so well? Perhaps.

"Harry," the Headmaster said, once again getting his attention. "I have spoken with Professors Snape and Sprout, as well as Madam Pomfrey, and we were wondering if you would like some assistance in improving your parselmagic."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Assistance?"

"Well, I know Professor Snape has already begun helping you, through giving you 'The Art of Parsel,' but the assistance I am talking about is a bit more hands on."

Harry waited for more explanation.

"Madam Pomfrey has already agreed to allow you to help her on the weekends here, within the infirmary, if you wished."

"You mean, I would use parselmagic to heal whoever comes in here?" Harry asked, obviously becoming excited.

"Yes, but only on the weekends, unless she felt your ability was needed specifically during the week."

"That would be great! Do I start today? It is Saturday, right?" he asked eagerly.

"It is Saturday, but I doubt she would want you to heal anyone so soon after recovering from magical fatigue."

"Oh." Harry slouched.

"But I'm sure next week will be fine," Albus assured.

"What will be fine next week?" Pomfrey asked as she stepped from her office.

"For Harry to begin assisting you next weekend," the Headmaster answered.

She looked at Harry, her eyes narrowing slightly as she took in his sleepy state and noted his improved color. He had looked dreadfully pale when they had first brought him in.

"We will see. If I find his magic is back where it should be, I won't see any problem in letting him help me," she said, before giving Harry a small smile.

Harry couldn't help but beam.

Dumbledore smiled softly, his eyes twinkling brightly as he became confident he had made the right choice.

With that, Professor Sprout entered, quickly going to her youngest Hufflepuff.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked, taking his hand as Dumbledore stepped back to give her room.

"Fine, professor," Harry answered, trying not to blush at the concern she was showing.

"And Coral? How is she?" she asked, looking down at the colorful snake already around Harry's scarred wrist.

:Coral?: Harry asked, suddenly realizing the thought hadn't crossed his mind. He had been too busy thinking about Draco and then about what the Headmaster had proposed.

:I am fine, Harry. Being a magical snake, your magic channeling through me cannot harm me. I am much like a wand in that regard: she said. :Though, if I was a normal snake, I would not have fared as well:

:I'm glad you're alright: Harry said, utterly relieved.

"Harry?" Sprout asked, a little worried as she couldn't understand what was being said.

"Oh, she's alright. She told me my magic can't hurt her while going through her. She's sort of like a wand. I was just relieved," Harry answered, turning slightly pink.

"Extraordinary," Dumbledore said. "I assume it is because she is a magical snake?"

"Yes, sir. She doesn't think a normal snake would—"

:A normal snake would have likely died, Harry: she interrupted.

Harry swallowed thickly. "A normal snake probably would have died."

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes holding great understanding, as if what Harry had just said solved a riddle in his mind.

"Well, Harry," Dumbledore said, preventing the silence that was about to rise. "Take all the time you need to rest. If you want to reach what Professor Snape spoke of, you need to allow your body and magic to recover. What you had done was quite strenuous, after all."

Harry's eyes widened, suddenly wondering what exactly his favorite professor had told the Headmaster and whether or not Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout knew as well.

Did they know about the Legacy Spell? Had the professor gotten in trouble?

Did they know about the block?

His face must have been like a book, for Dumbledore quickly moved toward him.

"No need to be alarmed. Professor Snape told me, and I felt it best to inform Madam Pomfrey, as she is your healer, and Professor Sprout, your Head of House. What Professor Snape told me will stay between us. I understand this sort of thing can be rather personal," Dumbledore said lightly. "Harry, like Professor Snape, we are here to help you."

Harry blinked, before looking to Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey.

They nodded as Harry's eyes settled on Sprout's gently smiling face, which was glowing with sincerity. Harry had a fluttering thought that maybe this was how it felt to be loved.

O o O o O

Draco slowed his pace as he approached the infirmary doors. He saw Neville and a few other Hufflepuffs waiting just outside in the hall.

"Longbottom," he said, coming to a stop before them.

"Hello, Draco," Neville said quietly.

Cedric Diggory, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Ernie Macmillan were there as well.

Draco and Neville hadn't had the opportunity to really speak since the accident, and they weren't really sure what to say to each other now.

"I heard he has woken up," Draco said, deciding that would do for an explanation as to why he was there.

They nodded.

"Professor Sprout told us he had woken up about a half hour ago," Cedric said.

"Are they not allowing visitors?" Draco asked, seeing as they were still all in the hall and the door was closed.

"The Headmaster and our Head of House are speaking with him," Susan stated.

Draco's eyes widened. "Oh."

They stood there and stared at one another for several seconds.

"So, uh, how are you? I mean . . ." Ernie said, trying to make the moment less awkward.

"I'm much better. Potter . . . he did a good job," Draco said, a little embarrassed for being so honest. He wasn't used to dealing with or admitting weakness in any way to anyone, but he couldn't deny what Harry had done for him. He could still remember the feeling of his magic reentering him. It had been very close.

He was understandably still trying to come to terms with it. The thought of death was not a very tangible thing to him, and the realization that he had been so close to it was very hard to actually grasp and accept.

"That's good. It looked pretty bad," Justin said, remembering what he had seen that day.

They hadn't been really close, but they had followed everyone else behind Madam Hooch, and the color red was easy to spot from most any distance.

"Yes, well . . ." Draco said, subconsciously rubbing his arm that Pomfrey had healed.

"What did it feel like?" Hannah piped up, before shying away behind Susan as they all turned their eyes to her.

Draco cleared his throat. "It, well, it wasn't really pleasant, but it definitely beat being dead."

"So it hurt?" Ernie asked, intrigued.

It was clear Draco didn't really like their curiosity. "No, it felt *wonderful*. Merlin, what do you think jagged bone digging into raw nerves feels like? And then to have said bone shards align and rejoin to reform your shattered skull? It bloody hurts!"

"Oh," Ernie said, quite chagrined. "Sorry, Malfoy, I was just curious. Didn't mean to remind you."

Malfoy continued to stare at him unwaveringly for a few more seconds, before he softened his expression. "I probably would have asked the same," he muttered after a moment.

Suddenly, the infirmary doors opened and the Headmaster and Professor Sprout stepped out.

"Ah, waiting to visit Mr. Potter, I presume?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, sir," Cedric answered.

"I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will allow you to enter," he said, stepping aside to let them pass.

"Thank you, Professor," Cedric said, before looking to his Head of House.

"Go on, I'm sure he'll be happy to see all of you," she said, before continuing down the hall with the headmaster.

With that, they hurried into the infirmary.

O o O o O

Severus peered over the head table to look at the students below. Harry had been released from the infirmary earlier that day, and, according to Hagrid, had immediately headed to the half giant's place for tea with Neville and Draco.

He looked over at his godson, who was happily chatting away with Nott and Zabini. Crabbe and Goyle were across from them, listening in on the conversation. Severus wondered which path they would choose. He hoped they would not follow their fathers'.

Deciding he would have to wait and see, he turned his eyes to Mr. Potter, who was once again under intense scrutiny by his peers. Everyone was craning their necks to get a look at him, and many of them were trying their best to see the wrist Coral was currently curled around.

Word of the new scar had already become legend, now only barely preceded by the one on the boy's forehead. The past few days had been as Severus had mostly expected them to be after Harry's heroic actions, though some things even he couldn't have foreseen.

It was a livid Lucius Malfoy who had attended the last Board meeting, and, according to those present, he had ripped into the financial committee without any regard to how threatening and frightening he appeared (or maybe that was his point).

It had come to the Head of the Malfoy family's attention that the Headmaster had requested funding for new brooms for the last **six** years, and had been denied *every **single** time*. Such a simple request, one that had been reiterated every year, had been turned down because of the fear of raising tuition at Hogwarts. As a result, their

penny-pinching tendencies (or knut-pinching) had nearly cost a boy his life.

Lucius was furious and made it known. Suffice it to say, the Board immediately moved to overhaul and reorganize spending at Hogwarts.

Severus glanced at Dumbledore.

Albus had been pleased with the news, especially when the Board had asked him to provide them a list of things he felt needed a bit more funding.

The Headmaster sent them an in depth, three-foot-long roll of parchment fifteen minutes later with Fawkes.

Severus wondered if a fresh batch of potion ingredients had made it on that list. Hopefully.

He shook his head, berating himself for being so selfish. It wasn't like he didn't have the funds himself to get whatever he wished, ingredients wise . . . well, save for basilisk parts, unicorn blood, dragon eyes, vampire fangs, and banshee hair, but besides those things he could get whatever he wished.

He looked across the head table to Madam Pomfrey.

Harry would be helping her next weekend. He wondered if Madam Pomfrey had anything specifically planned for him to do. Well, whatever her plans, Severus was certain the famous Hufflepuff would improve his overall healing skills, just as he had in the future with her.

O o O o O

Harry scratched the top of Coral's head, just as she liked as they approached the infirmary.

The past week had been a little difficult for him. People were more curious about him than ever, and them whispering . . . it was driving him crazy. Didn't they know he was right there and could hear them? It was annoying.

To top it all off, he also learned earlier that week that he had made it into the Prophet, the wizarding newspaper, several times since beginning Hogwarts. They had informed the public of his sorting, the fact he was a Parselmouth, and now his actions in saving Draco's life.

He really wondered where they got off believing they had the right to report all of that

without asking his permission. Oh well, there was nothing he could really do about it, and he had wanted people to get used to him being a Parselmouth. Perhaps this way had been best. Just like a band-aid. Rip it off and just get it over with. And at least they weren't saying anything malicious. So far they had been telling the truth, well, for the most part. The bit about him stealing a bit of the Dark Lord's powers when he had been a baby was a bit of a stretch (their attempt to explain where he had gotten the ability to speak Parseltongue). He could only shake his head.

Harry had continued reading the books Professor Snape had given him, and had even reread certain parts in 'The Art of Parsel'. He wanted to go in the infirmary prepared to help Madam Pomfrey.

He sighed to himself, remembering what he had realized after rereading one of the last chapters in the Parsel book. Evidently, he hadn't needed to pump Draco with as much magic as he had. His method had worked, of course, and at the time it was the best option since he didn't know/understand any other technique, but he had made it harder on himself. That was why he had passed out afterward, and why he had burned himself. Well, it was a lesson learned, that was for sure. Next time (though, hopefully there wouldn't be a next time), he would better manipulate and control his magic he was putting into the patient, rather than simply push and pray for the best.

He entered the infirmary, the door slowly closing behind him.

"Mr. Potter, right on time," Madam Pomfrey said, moving around an empty bed.

Harry continued forward, before stopping a few feet before her.

"I usually only have one or two students come in on the weekends for little things, like stomach aches and minor hexes and injuries, so I have gathered a few of my old healing textbooks from the healing university I attended."

Harry looked over to the bed behind her. Sure enough, four large textbooks were on the side table.

"I understand that Professor Snape has already given you extra reading material?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I've finished most of them, though, so I can take on a few more if you need me to, Ma'am."

She shook her head. "No, I won't assign you outside reading material. You'll be reading while you are here. I was just curious about what he had given you and how far you have gotten."

"Oh. Well, I've finished reading 'The Art of Parsel,' 'Caring for Serpents,' and 'The Beginner's Guide to the Art of Brewing: Ingredients.' And I'm about done with 'The Human Anatomy' and 'Controlling Your Inner Magic.' There's another, but I haven't gotten really far in it yet." Harry hoped she wouldn't ask about that last bit. It was the Occlumency book.

"I see," she said with a smile, quite pleased. "Concerning 'Controlling Your Inner Magic,' I suggest you make that book your next priority to finish."

"Yes, Ma'am," he agreed.

"Alright, well, why don't we start with the basics?" she asked, turning around and going to the stack of books. She retrieved the one on top before sitting on the edge of the bed and motioning Harry to sit beside her.

Harry did so, wondering if she was going to read to him. He blushed at the thought. No one had read to him before.

She opened the book on her lap, showing him the pages of text and moving images. Looking at the chapter title, he found the words, 'Inner Core and Network'.

Seeing she had Harry's complete attention, she began teaching, using the book as a guide, rather than a script to read from.

"This image shows a basic layout of how magic flows in the body, however, you need to remember that the flow will adapt to the needs of the patient. A person's magic will automatically flood to the injured area to help aid the body's physical defenses and healing," she said.

Harry nodded, doing his best to soak up everything she was telling him.

O o O o O

"Hey, Neville," Harry said, entering their dormitory and heading for his bed. Ernie and Justin were there as well, playing exploding snap on the floor. It was the afternoon, Harry had eaten lunch with Madam Pomfrey.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, excitedly. "I just got a letter from my Gran. She's going to take me to Ollivander's this Christmas to get me a wand!"

Harry frowned, confused. "Don't you already have a wand? Are you getting a secondary?"

Neville shook his head. "No. The wand I have is my dad's, but she said she's decided I should go ahead and get my own."

Harry nodded, trying to understand. Why hadn't she taken him to Ollivander's before he got to Hogwarts? "That's good. Everyone needs a wand that has chosen them."

Neville smiled.

"So, uh, how was the infirmary?" Neville asked.

Ernie and Justin slowed their game a bit to eavesdrop.

"Well, only one person came in to see Madam Pomfrey. It was to reverse a simple hex. Anyway, we went over how magic flows through the body and how injuries affects it," Harry answered.

"Cool. So, you're going there tomorrow?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, same time, 9 am."

Just then, Smith stepped in, leaving the door slightly ajar as Harry had.

"Oh, Potter's back from making miracles," Smith stated, crossing his arms as he entered the room.

Harry raised an eyebrow, but decided to remain silent as anything he said would do nothing to appease the arrogant boy. Smith had been throwing him dirty looks all week.

"Have nothing to say?" Smith continued airily, before lowering his tone, his face scrunching slightly into a scowl. "Figures."

"Smith, what is your problem?" Justin asked, having had enough of the slightly older boy's manners.

"Oh, you must ask? I thought it was clear," he said, glancing at Justin with a sneer before refocusing on Harry. "I don't like teachers' pets. People who get everything without even really asking." He glanced at Coral whose head was peeking from Harry's sleeve.

Harry shifted his stance a little bit, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. Smith was still sore about what happened in Potions?

"Smith, you need to lay off. Harry hasn't done anything to you," Ernie said, getting up

from the floor and abandoning the card game.

"You people don't see it, do you? He's playing you, just like he's playing the rest of the school. The great and mighty Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived who saved us all from You-Know-Who! We should worship him! Bend over backwards to serve him! Pfffttt! Pathetic."

"Leave Harry alone, he hasn't asked for any of that," Neville said, stepping up beside Harry.

"He doesn't need to," Smith practically growled. "He has everyone wrapped around his finger. I bet he's never wanted for anything in his entire life!"

Harry narrowed his eyes, no longer merely annoyed. Now he could actually feel a touch of anger growing at his center. Smith didn't know anything.

"I bet at home he doesn't even need to lift a finger to do anything, I bet the muggles are ecstatic with him being who he is," he said, watching Harry's expression closely. Smith smirked at what he saw and decided to continue along that vein. "He's got a life of luxury, no doubt, goodies and special treatment up to his ears, and he's not even a pureblood!"

"Like you, I bet?" Justin interjected sarcastically.

"My family has traced its roots back to Helga Hufflepuff herself, which is more than I can say Potter can claim. His father came from a simple line, though respected it wasn't particularly powerful. And as for his *mother.* . . ." Smith's eyes sharpened like a predator's, having noticed Harry's jaw clench.

Harry's green eyes drilled into Smith's pale brown, his anger now having grown into a quiet fury as, overlooked by those in the room, a few items on the bedside tables began to vibrate, ever so slightly.

"Don't," Harry stated, his voice thick with a barely restrained rage.

Smith didn't listen.

"His mother was a bloody, good-for-nothing *mudblood*."

Neville and Ernie gasped, as if they had just heard the most putrid word ever created. Justin blinked, a little confused. Harry, however, was just furious.

He didn't know what that word meant, but it obviously wasn't a nice one. He felt a

sharp pain in his heart he had never felt before and fought to keep his emotions in check. Sure, he had been victim to verbal taunts before, especially from Dudley, but even his cousin had never broached the subject of his mother. Granted, that may have been due to Aunt Petunia banning even the briefest mention of her sister, but Dudley had never involved Harry's mother in his spoken assaults.

Harry's hands clenched into fists as Smith opened his mouth again.

Smith was on a roll and wouldn't stop willingly.

"I have to give it to her, though; she did know how to marry rich. Too bad the mudblood wasn't smart enough to prevent herself from getting killed."

"Shut up!" Harry suddenly shouted, his voice contorted slightly by the tightness in his chest, finally having had enough. He thrust his left hand forward, pointing at Smith with Coral hissing heatedly from it as every glass object in the room shattered. "I don't care what you say about me, but leave my family out of it! You know nothing!"

A sharp, magical wind whipped around Harry, his hair and robes being tossed every which way as the small tables in the room began to shake and the curtains on the bedposts slid violently along their rods away from Harry.

Smith was too stunned to move, too scared to step back, too shocked to do anything else but stare, wide-eyed as Harry stiffly lowered his arm.

And then the door to their dorm opened all the way.

"What in Merlin's name is going on in here?"

Harry didn't move. He was still too furious and he could still feel his hair being tousled about magically.

"P-professor Sprout!" Neville managed as he turned to the new voice.

There was Professor Sprout, standing just within the doorway with Cedric peering in right behind her.

Harry swallowed, his eyes still drilling into Smith's as he forced himself to relax. It wouldn't do to make anything else happen. At the Dursleys, he had had to stomach stuffing his magic back within himself quickly after an accident. Failing to do so would have dire consequences.

"Smith has a problem," Justin supplied helpfully, absolutely disgusted with the

arrogant prat. "He called Harry's mum a mudblood and said some other rather cruel things."

"He what?" Sprout questioned, abhorred.

Neville and Ernie nodded, supporting Justin's statement while Harry simply stood there, oblivious to the tears he had been unable to contain that were now pooling just below his eyes.

"I heard part of it, Professor. It's why I came to get you," Cedric said. "When I heard. . . ." He trailed off, not about to say the word his mother had forbidden him to ever say.

"Mr. Smith, what do you have to say for yourself?" Professor Sprout was no longer soft and flowery. She was a Head of House demanding answers.

Smith gulped, knowing there was no way he could get himself out of this. Why hadn't he shut the door all the way?

Sprout shook her head. "Come with me, Mr. Smith," she stated sternly before looking to Cedric. "Thank you for getting me, Mr. Diggory. I understand there were no prefects close by when it happened, and you did right by coming to me. Ten points to Hufflepuff." She then turned her attention on Harry, who had barely gotten himself back under control. He was still standing stiffly. "Mr. Potter, I'll be back to speak with you, so please do not leave the dormitories."

"Yes, ma'am," he managed, briefly turning his face to her as she looked at Neville, Ernie, and Justin.

"The same goes for the rest of you. I will also send up one of the prefects to help repair the room," she added, her eyes taking note of the broken glass and disturbed furniture. "Be careful with the glass."

"Yes, Professor," Justin said as the others nodded.

With that, Smith and Sprout left.

O o O o O

Professor Sprout shook her head as she thought about Smith.

He would be serving detention with Mr. Filch for the next four days, and then with her for the last one. She liked to make sure her Hufflepuffs had learned their lesson,

personally.

She had made him recount what he had said to Harry and what the others had said, before bringing the others in to hear their side. It was a grueling hour and a half, but when it was done, she had the full account of the event and knew exactly who was at fault. Hence the five day detention.

And now she was waiting for Harry to arrive. She had asked him to come to her office after dinner to discuss what had happened that afternoon a bit further.

He clearly had a lot of power at his disposal, more than one would think possible at his age and with his home life. She supposed it was in part due to Severus' potions regimen he had him on, the boy's sleeping mage status aside.

She closed her eyes briefly, recalling what she had seen when she had first opened that door.

She had never seen such fury on a child's face before, and she had seen plenty of angry children in her life at Hogwarts. And the power pouring off of him . . . it had almost been unnatural, and yet, the magic had been so pure. But it was not simply the amount and type of magic that had caught her attention. It was the boy's control. The fact he had been able to rein it in as he had without allowing it to cause further damage was quite a feat, especially since the cause of his outburst was still in the room.

Of course, there were things Harry could have done differently to put an end to the drama without adding to it, but he was still a child, and the things Smith had said would have been hard for even an adult to shrug off. She also knew she would need to help Harry with his anger. After speaking with Neville and the others, Harry had been calm for most of the time, and then he had just snapped.

She was certain his ability to bury his emotions had been because of the Dursleys, but it wasn't healthy for the boy, and definitely did nothing to keep accidental magic from occurring when his emotions finally became too much for him to hold. She was also sure his remarkable ability to quiet his magic quickly had been due to his home life as well.

The boy certainly had potential though, and now it was time for her to guide him . . . and in more ways than just in magic.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked, stepping into her office while giving the door a soft knock to announce his presence.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Please, sit down."

O o O o O

Severus resisted the urge to slam his fist down on his desk angrily, but then surrendered to his feelings and brought down his closed hand firmly against the mahogany wood with a bang.

He should have acted. He should have found a way to snatch the rat, capture him, reveal him. For all the good he had been able to accomplish since he had come back, he had not been able to foresee all the consequences.

It was a backlash.

One of many that had begun cropping up since he had begun changing things.

Of course, the first few backlashes he had been able to counteract and make the events fallout as he wanted, like Voldemort taking a more active interest in Harry, probably because of his Parselmouth status coming out early. It had been why the boy's scar had begun acting up far sooner than it had in the original timeline. Thankfully, Harry had trusted him enough to come to him about his headaches and he had been able to respond accordingly. It had all been quite fortunate, now that he thought about it.

But what had caused the rat to disappear as he had? Was it the knowledge that the Dark Lord was out there? No, that didn't make sense. Pettigrew had been given enough clues to come to that conclusion long before this. No, something had been altered, something had happened differently and caused Pettigrew to risk leaving the safety of the Weasleys two years sooner than he would have.

Severus shook himself. He may never know what had triggered the change of the rat's actions, but it was clear it all stemmed back to him returning.

With a sigh, he acknowledged that he had become too confident, certain the rat would stick around for a bit longer, as he had the first time. Where had the rat gone? When had he left? As far as Severus knew, he could have vanished before Quirrell had left, which meant he could be anywhere now.

Had Pettigrew fled in fear of the Dark Lord, or had he run to him? Was he hiding or serving?

Severus didn't know which would be worse.

If he was hiding, there may be no hope of ever finding him and proving Black's innocence.

If he was serving . . . who knew what damage he could bring to the Wizarding World.

Severus closed his eyes, knowing he shouldn't dwell on the mistake he had made. He had too much to do to wallow in self-loathing. He had to focus on getting Harry ready for the future, whatever it held.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks again for the reviews ^^

The next part, *Remus*, is in the works.

Remus

Part 9: Remus

Halloween was approaching and classes were progressing as well as Harry could have hoped, better in fact. Potions remained his favorite, but Defense Against the Dark Arts, still taught under Dumbledore, was a close second. Dumbledore had given them intense instruction in a variety of defensive spells so far and Harry wondered how much he and his peers would have missed out on if Quirrell had managed to continue 'teaching'. Offensive spells were included in the Headmaster's lessons, but avoiding getting hit by curses and hexes remained to be the main focus. The Headmaster also iterated that dodging spells could be just as effective as deflecting or absorbing them with a shield, physical or conjured.

Transfiguration and Charms were going well, though each in their own way. The spells they were learning were basic and for beginners, but it was obvious they were the foundation of more advanced ones. Harry wondered when they would get to animating objects. He also discovered he had a knack for details, such as producing particular textures on an object in Transfigurations, or improving the strength and duration of a charm. He was not exactly a prodigy though. His ease in casting was likely due to his studies in controlling his inner magic and studying ahead.

His inner magic. . . . Not long after the incident with Smith, Professor Sprout had called him into her office. Evidently, his accidental magic had caught her attention and she wanted to know if he would be interested in some private lessons with her after the Winter Holidays. Not about to turn down another opportunity to improve himself, he quickly agreed, though he did ask if this one-on-one instruction was common place.

"Every other year or so I give personal instruction to a student who could use particular guidance in a subject, either to help them overcome a weakness or improve a strength. Last year, I instructed Cedric Diggory in transfiguration. I saw he had potential in it but was hindering himself for some reason."

"And so, you helped him get over it?"

"Yes, and now he is one of the top transfiguration students in his year," she said proudly. "Now, I'm sure he could have gotten there by himself, but why struggle alone when you can get help?"

Harry couldn't argue with her wisdom, so nodded.

"I also wanted to talk to you about why your accidental magic had cropped up that moment and in the manner it had."

Harry looked down, feeling a bit ashamed of himself. He was usually very good at keeping cool, even though he was boiling inside. He had had to learn to keep his temper many times in the Dursley household or pay for it later.

"I am not angry with you, Harry; I just want you to know that it is alright to get angry. Smith had said some nasty things, and, considering everything, you did quite well preventing yourself from lashing out unreasonably. I am proud of you. However, I want you to remember that you should always be in control of yourself, never your anger. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, part of his mind going to a muggle series. Star Wars.

"I can tell you have had a lot of practice conditioning yourself in keeping your emotions hidden, and I believe I am also right to assume the same goes for your ability to pull in your magic?"

He nodded again, reminding himself that since she knew about the block it made sense that she would know about the Dursleys as well.

"Anger can be a powerful thing; we have to be careful with it. It can lead to other things harder to handle."

"You mean like the path to the dark side from Star Wars," he said suddenly.

Sprout blinked in confusion. "Star Wars?"

"Yeah, it's a muggle movie series. 'Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.' The leader of the Jedis said that. Yoda."

"Hmm, I'd like to see this series," she said, intrigued.

"It's the best series I've ever seen," Harry said, while silently adding it was also the only *series he had ever seen.*

He had been able to see it when he had made a bargain with Dudley. He had promised to serve him and his friends cookies and drinks during the movie so they would never need to get up while it played. He had missed a few scenes, but he had heard the entire movie, which was more than what he would have gotten if he had been in his cupboard or outside working.

"Well, I will definitely try to find a way to watch it then," she said with a smile, before continuing the conversation by detailing when they would begin and where the lessons would be held.

Harry left her office a few minutes later, looking forward to January.

His lessons with Madam Pomfrey in Parselmagic had advanced somewhat. He could now confidently heal minor injuries without any problem whatsoever. He had healed six students since beginning in the infirmary. Two had been Quidditch injuries, no more than scrapes and bruises; one had been a twisted ankle, caused by the trick stair; and the other three had been from simple rough housing or foolish house rivalry. Madam Pomfrey handled the jinxes, but she taught him how to handle each one since she saw no harm to showing him. When he wasn't healing an injury (which was most of the time), Madam Pomfrey had him read her old books on anatomy and healing magic. Often times, she would go over the chapter with him and tell him about times she had had to use certain techniques to heal a patient. Harry would have never thought she had such an interesting life before working at Hogwarts. Who knew she had been a nurse at Saint Mungo's in the years during the war against Grindelwald? She had even been one of the nurses who made sure Dumbledore was alright after winning the famous duel against the evil wizard. Harry couldn't have asked for a better healing teacher.

Neville and his other dorm mates, except Smith (obviously), quickly became his devoted friends in the weeks that had past. Other Hufflepuffs also became his friends, including Susan, Hannah, and even Cedric, though he was more like a kind older brother than a friend to him. There were other Hufflepuffs of course, but he didn't know them well enough for him to consider them anything more than pleasant acquaintances. Maggie Tolbert, the Head Girl, and another seventh year, who simply went by Tonks, were two such people. Harry was fascinated by Tonks, as she was a Metamorphmagus. Both seventh year girls took time to make sure Harry and the other first years had everything they needed but nothing really beyond that, due to the age gap.

As for friends outside of his house, Draco Malfoy was easily the closest. In the classes where their houses were together, they often sat in the same area. Vince and Greg usually trailed behind Draco, remaining like a pair of bodyguards. Though at first it was easy to assume they were brainless Slytherin muscle, they were more lazy than dumb. Not a good condition, but there it was. They seemed to have improved since the third week of school, however, and Harry wondered if Draco had done something about their inactivity in classes.

Another thing that had caught his notice was the change in the bossy girl in

Gryffindor. He still wasn't sure of her name, Herminny or something, but ever since the beginning of October, she was no longer as intrusive as she had been before. He didn't know what to think of her sudden change, but she had definitely mellowed, and everyone else was too thankful to really question what had caused it. Perhaps she had finally realized her attitude was ostracizing her, or maybe one of the older students had pulled her aside and told her to tone it down some. Whatever the reason, Harry was certain it had saved the girl trouble with members of her house. No one liked to be told what to do, and no one liked a know-it-all.

The red headed boy in Gryffindor, Ron, remained solemn about his missing pet and grew withdrawn whenever someone asked him if he had found his rat yet.

"No, not yet," he would answer. "Scabbers started acting strange around the first week of school and then just disappeared. I miss him."

Harry really felt for him and wondered if Ron would mind if he asked Coral to see if she could find where the rat might have gone, but the few times he tried to talk to him, others in the house would interrupt and ask about Coral. It was rather bothersome. Oh well, even if Ron agreed, it was doubtful the rat would ever be found. Chances were he had fled the castle and, as much as Harry hated to admit it, the rat had probably become food to some predator.

As for others in his year but outside his house, he hadn't really had the opportunity to make solid acquaintances, let alone friends. Most of his peers were still too awestruck to have a real conversation with him. Harry hoped it wouldn't always be like that.

Smith remained an arrogant prat, but he had yet to start anything with Harry again after the confrontation in the dormitory. That was fine by Harry, but Smith continued giving him dirty looks and Harry was sure it was only a matter of time until Smith would try to pull something else. No matter, he would be ready. Gone were the days where he would endure bullying, verbal or physical. Never again would he stand idle and allow himself to take blows without standing up for himself, because. . . .

He was not a freak here.

He was a Hufflepuff.

He was not 'boy' here.

He was Harry Potter.

And, most importantly, he was not alone here.

He was among loyal friends.

O o O o O

Severus took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

He had made another move, once again altering another individual's future sooner than he may have liked, but it could not be helped now.

Remus Lupin would be arriving to become the DADA professor on Halloween.

Severus had spoken with Dumbledore and had 'let slip' that Lupin would be a tolerable replacement, more than Gilderoy Lockhart at any rate, who the Headmaster had been considering due to lack of willing professor candidates.

After everything Voldemort had done, that curse on the DADA position was one of the worst things he had done. How many generations had he caused detrimental, if not irreversible, harm to in taking away consistent defense instruction? How many people had been made sorely ill-prepared for the raids he carried out because they had never been taught how to cast a proper shield charm, let alone an expelliarmus? Too many, Severus was sure.

Severus refocused, deciding to think about something else.

He had taken it upon himself to speak with Hermione. She had come to his office wanting to know about a particular consequence of an ingredient when he decided he would save her from some future heartache. He had not particularly enjoyed the task, but it had to be done. She had to be told, in blunt terms, that her bossy behavior was not helping anyone. She had taken it rather well, Severus thought, and had only needed to fight back tears instead of sobs (as he had been expecting). Afterwards, she nodded in understanding and fled the room.

Severus was pleased with the results, and he was sure there wouldn't be any weeping Gryffindor in the girl's lavatory this Halloween. What a relief.

O o O o O

The school was buzzing with the news that soon Dumbledore would no longer be teaching DADA. Evidently, he had found a replacement and would be revealing the new professor soon.

Harry couldn't say he was pleased with the news. What if the new professor was (Voldemort aside) just as bad as Quirrell? Of course, hopefully more care had been

taken in finding a replacement than what had been taken in hiring Quirrell, but he was still uneasy.

Entering the Great Hall with Neville and the others, they found it adorned extensively with Halloween decorations.

Harry was a bit unsure how he should feel about the day. Sure, it was a fun holiday and it promised to be much more enjoyable than his previous Halloweens, but it was also *the* day. The day his parents had been taken from him. The day Voldemort had marked him.

"Alright there, Harry?" Neville asked as they sat down across from Susan and Hannah.

"Yeah, just thinking."

Neville nodded. "I understand."

Harry didn't ask him if he really understood, but it seemed like he did, for which Harry was grateful.

The Feast passed quickly, and soon they found themselves looking up to the Headmaster when he stood up.

"Well, now that we have adequately stuffed ourselves, I would like to introduce your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he said, motioning to the far end of the table where Madam Pomfrey and Flitwick sat.

The student body followed the Headmaster's motion and their eyes came to rest on a rather grubby looking man. Granted, upon closer inspection, he was clean shaven and had tame hair, but his clothes. . . . They had seen better days.

Harry frowned a little, wondering why Hogwarts hadn't provided upfront pay to the man since he would be filling a much needed slot at the school. He understood that in the Muggle world such arrangements were common. It also helped keep the professionalism of a company. Uncle Vernon had droned on and on about the importance of a company's image and that her employees were part of that image. He had gone on that rant after finding a tiny stain at the edge of his business tie. That day had Harry scrubbing the thing for a good solid hour to get rid of it.

Harry pulled himself from the memory and refocused on the rather hesitant man who had risen to his feet when Dumbledore had motioned to him.

Despite his attire, the new professor had a quiet confidence Harry quickly recognized. It emerged in the way he kept himself straight in spite of, in Harry's opinion, his apparent desire to return to sitting, away from prying eyes. It reminded Harry of the janitor at his old school, when the principal at an assembly had introduced him to the student body for Remembrance Day. He was a World War II veteran.

:He appears more capable than garlic-towel man: Coral hissed quietly.

:Hopefully: Harry replied.

"Professor Remus Lupin," Dumbledore introduced.

The school clapped respectfully, wondering if this man would be a good teacher, or if he would be like all the others that had passed through before.

Lupin sat back down with a brief smile to them all soon after, not saying a word.

Harry couldn't help but be anxious about the next DADA lesson the following week.

O o O o O

Severus remained standoffish when it came to Remus (not to mention most people in general). Remus didn't mind and seemed to be relieved with the arrangement; however, Severus knew it would not be able to last long where Harry was concerned. If Harry remained true to form and performed as he had in Albus' DADA lessons, Remus would take notice. And then he would go to Minerva, his old Head of House, and ask for her thoughts on Harry. From there, things would really get moving.

The question Severus was now asking himself was . . . should he attempt to stop it or get involved when it happened? Should he step in and guide the situation? Or would it be better for him to stand back in that instance and watch things play out?

He didn't know.

Albus had admitted to him earlier that week, before contacting Remus, that Harry was showing amazing skill in the magic he had learned so far in all of his classes. His devotion and determination was made evident in every casting attempt he made, and whether or not he succeeded on the first try, he was always eager to improve. His zealousness for such improvement was also unique. Contrary to most eager students (like Hermione), he was not outspoken about his skills or growing knowledge. He rarely volunteered answers when the professor asked the class a

question; instead, he kept his head down. The only times he would answer was when he was specifically called upon, but when he did answer, he was always thorough and quick.

He was much like a sponge, and the more and more Severus heard his coworkers' comments about the boy, a part of him straightened in pride for his young old friend, while another part of himself saddened. Had they been so blind last time that such a hungry student had been passed over?

Granted, he had to remind himself that the professors' interactions with Harry were not the only things different this time. Harry was in a different house and had different friends, and the fact that Neville Longbottom was his best friend had certainly changed things. Instead of Ronald Wealey, who had been a fairly loyal friend but a constant distraction, he now had Neville, who didn't particularly care about Quidditch or other rather pointless things. Neville was desperate to make his Gran proud, and, now that he had some confidence, thanks to Harry, he in turn was helping keep Harry focused.

But even so, they had been very blind before. And it wasn't as if he and the other professors hadn't been given glimpses of Harry's abilities in the old timeline. He had persevered through tasks most adults would find themselves helpless in, and then in his third year. . . . He had devoted how many hours with Remus to learn the Patronus Charm? And then later that same year he successfully forced hundreds of dementors away. That had obviously not been normal. Not for an adult and certainly not for a thirteen year old boy.

How had they missed it? How had they failed to notice and point it out to the others?

And then fourth year. . . . Harry had poured himself over countless books, absorbing as much as he could in the short time he had. And to top it all off, he actually became a match for his competitors. Granted, there was some luck involved, but in the end he succeeded where many others had and would have failed.

He had won the tournament, before facing off with Voldemort and escaping with his life and the body of his older friend.

Cedric.

Severus wondered if things would play out as they had last time. Would fate be so cruel and select that boy again for the tournament? Would the tournament even be held? He certainly hoped not.

He pulled his thoughts away from such dark things and focused more on the

present. Pomona had spoken with him earlier that month about Harry concerning the incident with Smith. He was pleasantly surprised she had come to him, rather than the Headmaster, but it was just as well.

"It was amazing, Severus," she said, taking a seat on his couch.

"Oh?"

"His anger was understandable. What Smith had said was utterly reprehensible, but Potter's control. . . . It was staggering."

"I see."

"You should have seen it, Severus, I doubt even Albus has as much control when having to pull in his magic."

Severus nodded thoughtfully, thinking back to the incident in the older man's office when he had told him about Harry's life at the Dursley's.

"Well, the reason why I've come by is to let you know what had happened and to inform you I will begin light instruction with him after the holidays."

"Light instruction?" Severus asked, suddenly wondering what the stout woman had in mind exactly.

"To improve his control. I understand you've given him extra reading material covering this sort of thing?"

He nodded.

"Well, books can only take him so far, and, with control like that, personal instruction is needed. If I'm right, he's already begun using the techniques in that Inner Magic book. He will need further guidance or his control will conform to how it is now, and not improve much at all. Granted, his control is marvelous already, but it has plenty of room for improvement. He is barely half way to his magical majority, after all."

Severus blinked, seeing her point that steps needed to be taken.

"Have you spoken to the Headmaster about this?" he asked.

"No, not yet. I figured it would be better to apologize than ask for permission in this instance, and that is if he disapproves when he learns of it."

The Potions Master smirked. Who knew the Head of Hufflepuff could be so devious?

"Very well. After the Holidays then," Severus said. "Oh, and I gave him a book on Occlumency. He is still too young to really begin mastering the art, but a few of the calming exercises in it may be helpful with whatever you have planned for him."

"Thank you, I will keep that in mind."

Severus smiled, very grateful that Harry had been sorted in Pomona's house.

O o O o O

Harry and the other Hufflepuffs entered the DADA room with the Gryffindors, all of them wondering how this new teacher would be. Going to their desks and sitting down, they quickly turned their attention to Professor Lupin, who had just come from the back office.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I understand the Headmaster had left off at defending yourselves against simple hexes and counteracting them?"

He received a few nods.

"Very good. Then open your books to chapter eight. We will begin an in-depth look into shield charms."

The lecture continued, and they were pleased that they could understand him and that he was actually teaching them.

"Later this week, we will attempt to cast the basic shield charm, but I think having a solid understanding of the theory is important to have first in this instance," he said, walking around their desks and making sure no one was slacking off or reading something they shouldn't be.

Harry had already read this chapter, but the pictures within were interesting so he was content to studying the wand motions and mentally repeating the necessary incantation.

Suddenly, Coral stiffened around his wrist, her coils tightening around his white scar.

Harry quickly leaned forward, lowering his face over her.

:What's wrong?: Harry asked as Lupin came up behind him and continued to Susan who had her hand up.

:The professor. He's . . . . It's hard to explain, I just feel. . . .: she hissed quietly.

:Feel what?: Harry asked, not noticing how Professor Lupin turned back to him after he answered Susan's question.

:He's dangerous. I feel . . . threatened almost:

Harry frowned, raising his face to the professor, only to freeze when he realized the professor was staring right at him. He met his gaze and couldn't help but hold it.

He let his magic flow from his center and swirl within him, as the book had illustrated to calm one's self, trying to draw some amount of comfort as he stared back into the deep hazel eyes of the new professor.

Coral was right.

This man was dangerous.

He didn't know how he knew, he just did.

The professor turned around and headed back to the front of the class.

"For Thursday, I would like a foot of parchment on shield charms discussing their strengths and weaknesses," Lupin said, just as class time came to an end.

O o O o O

"Something is off about him," Harry said quietly.

They were outside near Hagrid's hut.

"He seems nice though, and he's much better than Quirrell, and according to the older students, he's one of the best they've had in years. He's almost as good as Dumbledore on teaching the subject," Susan said.

"I agree with you, but something . . . I don't know." Harry sighed, wishing he could explain.

"Well, he is a good teacher. Who knows what he's gone through to know what he does about Defense," Neville suggested. "I mean, he does have a lot of scars."

"What do you actually feel, Harry?" Susan asked.

"Like he's dangerous. Like, he could just . . . I know, be unleashed."

"You make it sound as if he's an animal," Susan said with a frown.

Harry blinked. "You're right, but that's what it feels like."

"Like he's a wild animal?" Neville asked, confused.

"Well, sort of." Harry shifted, trying to make sense of it himself. "I'm not saying he's bad, he's just . . . more than he appears I think."

"Like an animagus?" Susan asked.

"Like Professor McGonagall?" Harry asked. "Hmm, I suppose he could be."

"Yeah, and maybe he's a giant grizzly or a tiger, and that's why he feels dangerous to you and Coral," Neville agreed.

Harry narrowed his eyes some, not quite convinced. "Maybe."

O o O o O

Remus could hardly believe how much his life had changed in the past week. He now had a nice warm place to stay, a well paying job in his most favorite place on earth, **and** he got to teach his best friend's boy!

He never thought he would feel so content.

And Harry, wow, that boy was amazing. He was definitely Lily's son. He was excelling in all of his classes and working fervently as if he had something to prove. Remus wondered what drove him.

"How has your first week here as a professor been, Remus?" Flitwick asked as he entered his office.

"It has been great so far," he said, not that surprised that the short professor had stopped by.

"Good, good. So, eh, no problems, I trust?"

"Like with the students? No, not yet. I have been impressed by a few of them, however."

"Oh?"

"Cedric Diggory seems to have a good handle on things, and Penelope Clearwater is very sharp."

Flitwick beamed at the mention of one of his Ravenclaws.

"But I am most surprised by Harry Potter. Being James' son, I had admittedly expected someone a bit different; granted, he is also Lily's," he said, growing quiet at the end.

"Yes, he is quite remarkable, is he not? I trust Albus told you about his special circumstances when you first arrived?"

Remus nodded, recalling his surprise in learning about Coral and Harry's parselmagic. He had read the Prophet, of course, but it was different hearing it from the Headmaster. He had also found it odd that the Headmaster had not mentioned the Dursleys at all. He had meant to question him about them, to learn if Harry was happy there, but he had gotten sidetracked with lesson plans and such soon after Dumbledore had given him a rundown of recent events surrounding Harry. A parselmouth . . . wow.

"So, what do you think of the boy so far?" Flitwick asked curiously. "I would like a newcomer's opinion."

"He is very observant and picks things up quickly. Though, if that comes from reading ahead, I am not sure. He is not very outspoken, but he answers the questions I ask him without any problems. He. . . ." Remus trailed off, unable to completely fight off a frown.

"What? What is it, Remus? He . . . what?" Flitwick asked when Remus didn't continue.

"He seems guarded. Guarded . . . around me. And I don't know why."

Flitwick nodded slowly with a dark understanding. "I see."

"Do you know why that could be? Or am I just imagining it?"

"Unfortunately, you are probably not imagining it. After all, he has very good reason to be leery of you, since you are the new DADA professor and the last one had not exactly been pleasant."

"But why is he the only one acting this way? None of the other students try to keep me in view whenever I enter the room or tense ever so slightly when I get within five feet of them."

Flitwick sighed. "You know that the student Quirrell targeted had been a Hufflepuff?"

"Yes, but what would tha- Oh, Merlin. It had been him? He was the Hufflepuff?"

Flitwick nodded solemnly.

"I definitely understand now."

"I am sure he will see you mean him no harm in time. He has only been in a few of your lessons, you see."

Remus nodded, now deep in thought.

"Well, I will see you tomorrow," Flitwick said, deciding to take his leave.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow. Thanks for stopping by."

"No problem, and if you have any questions, you know where to find me."

O o O o O

"He's getting sick again," Neville whispered to Harry when they entered DADA.

Harry nodded, his eyes narrowing a little in concern but also in slight suspicion.

In the middle of the previous month, Professor Lupin had gotten ill and the Headmaster had had to step in and sub for him for two whole days. Now, once again, it seemed the professor was getting sick again, and in exactly the same manner as last time.

"It's strange," Harry muttered.

"I agree. Wizards don't often get sick. We're not like muggles," Neville replied softly as the professor motioned them all to take out their books. Evidently, he was feeling too ill to have a practical lesson that day and wanted to work from the book.

Harry was still leery about Lupin. On the one hand, he enjoyed the man's lessons and was learning a lot from him, but, on the other, he couldn't shake the feeling that the man was hiding something. Something dangerous.

He did find himself concerned for the man's health, though; but then couldn't help but wonder if Lupin's reoccurring sickness was a ruse to cover something sinister, just as Quirrell's stuttering had been a cloak for his true nature. Granted, he had only been sick twice so far, but it seemed as if the Professor was used to being ill.

Things just didn't add up. Of course, he was certain the Headmaster had taken extra

care in finding the DADA replacement, and surely Professor Snape would not allow someone he found questionable to come near him and the other students, considering what had happened before. But, he knew, no one was infallible. The Hogwarts staff had been fooled before; they could be fooled again.

On a different matter, the winter holidays were approaching, and Harry was wondering where he would go during them. He knew Draco and Neville were going home for the break, as were most of the other students; however, he knew there was no way in . . . well, he knew he wasn't going back to the Dursleys for Christmas, not if he had anything to say about it.

He supposed remaining at Hogwarts wouldn't be so bad. He would be able to hang out in the library without any distractions and read to his heart's content. He wondered which of the professors would be remaining behind. He hoped Professor Snape would be around. And maybe Madam Pomfrey would have more projects for him to carry out. Most recently, she had started him on diagnosing students who came in, which had led him to using another ability granted by parselmagic. It was briefly mentioned in The Art of Parsel, but the particulars were not discussed. Harry soon learned it was pretty self explanatory.

While touching a patient and asking what the problem was, he would be shown. . . .

"Go on, Harry," Madam Pomfrey prompted, motioning him toward the third year Gryffindor.

Harry nodded and placed his hand on Lee Jordan's arm. :What is the problem?:

Suddenly, viewable only to him, the older boy's right knee gave a slight glow, and, in his mind's eye, he was shown a close up of muscle and tissue under the skin there. It appeared to be slightly swollen, and he could actually see blood that had seeped into the surrounding area.

Harry looked at the boy's knee, which was covered by jeans. "Did something hit your knee recently?"

The black boy beamed. "That's brilliant! How did you know?" Jordan asked. "I got hit by a bludger during Quidditch practice a few days ago. The thing had gotten away from the twins for a moment."

"Well, you still have some swelling, and am I right to say there's a bad bruise there too?"

Jordan nodded, impressed, as Harry moved Coral closer and spoke parseltongue.

"So brilliant," Jordan whispered as he felt his knee heal.

Harry thought it was brilliant too, and he wondered what he would be shown if he diagnosed Professor Lupin.

O o O o O

The weeks had passed quickly, and Severus could hardly believe they were preparing for the winter holidays.

It was very strange. Last time, he had been worrying about Quirrell getting the stone and frustrated with the Quidditch results. This time, his concerns were on completely different things.

Dumbledore was suspicious, though Severus was certain his trail was totally on the wrong track, which was the only blessing in the whole mess. The headmaster was clearly concerned with his wellbeing, for whatever reason, and had unknowingly let him know at nearly every turn. Part of Severus just wanted to yell out the truth to put an end to Albus' worried, barely subtle, glances toward him. But then, Severus admitted, bringing out the truth would only bring him more trouble and make everything even more complicated.

And so, he decided to endure.

Endure. It seemed to be the only thing he was really good at. Sure, he was a gifted strategist, a cunning spy, and the youngest Potions Master in over two hundred years, but lately, he felt . . . wary, old, and drawn. He had not slept well the last few nights, and it didn't seem that this night would be any different.

He could see the changes he had made in Harry, and he was proud of the boy, really he was, but he was . . . afraid. Afraid it would all be for naught. A part of him knew he was being too hard on himself, being too negative, and he knew the Harry he had left would not approve of his pessimistic thoughts, but he couldn't help it. It was in his nature. Every bit of good he had ever done had only come to bite him before the end. Nothing he ever did lasted, and no one he ever attempted to help was really saved.

Severus hit the wall of his private room with the palm of his hand hard. He enjoyed the echo it created and allowed himself to focus on the pain that tingled across his skin long after the sound of his flesh hitting the stone had gone away.

He was being stupid. He knew this. Harry had not sent him back only to have him question himself like this. His friend had not drained his core and given him a second

chance only for him to wallow in misery and fret over a possible future of death and hopelessness.

Severus straightened and pulled his smarting hand away from the wall, berating himself for falling into such foolish despair. He was better than this! He was the Head of Slytherin, a member of the Order of the Phoenix, an underground fighter of Potter's Resistance!

Exhaling, Severus briefly closed his eyes.

Collecting himself, he moved over and sat down in his comfy chair, recalling what Harry had told him just before he had sent him back. . . .

"I trust you, Severus," Harry said, stepping back and entering the network of runes drawn on the floor. "If anyone can do this, it's you."

"You have a great deal of confidence in me, Harry, more than I would have ever thought I would receive from you . . . or anyone. I will try not to disappoint, not that you will know if I failed."

"Dumbledore trusted you as much as I do," Harry pointed out. "And you won't fail. You're too stubborn."

Severus smiled softly in the darkness of his quarters, reminded that even if he didn't have faith in himself, Harry had, and, perhaps, he would again.

With that, the Potions Master closed his eyes, and sleep found him. . . .

The night air was thick with sooty fog. Pockets of fire were scattered among the piles of debris that had once been the buildings of Diagon Alley.

The pillars of the bank had crumbled, and bodies of goblins and wizards were among the ruins.

"We're too late," a man said, going to his knees.

"No, not quite," an older voice said. Dumbledore.

Severus stepped up beside the former Headmaster, his eyes falling to the kneeling man. "Get up, Lupin," he ordered. "We have to find him."

That broke Remus out of his reverie and he quickly stood.

"To the bank, come now," Dumbledore said, moving over the rubble and stepping

over cold bodies with solemn ease.

They came to the dilapidated walls of Gringotts, the great doors laying in shattered pieces everywhere. The doorway itself was now slanted, burned marks scarring all around the rim. They entered the silent place, wondering if they would find any life at all. There was so much death around them. This was one of the worst places they had seen this month. Voldemort's Lieutenants were really becoming Dark Lords in their own rights now.

With lit wands, they continued into the bank, going into the dark bowels of the broken place. With each step, their hope dimmed and doubt grew. They may never find him.

Knocking. They heard knocking.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, his voice echoing around them. "This way."

The knocking grew louder, more urgent, as they hurried deeper into the bank. Severus wasn't sure where they were now, but was sure they should have encountered dragons a few levels up. What had happened here?

The destruction was unparalleled, but it was clearly not all caused by Death Eaters, for they were now finding a few Death Eaters among the dead, some even high ranking. The serpent 'V' insignia on their robes signified this, and the more waves below the V, the higher the position.

Continuing on, they found several more dead Death Eaters, and fewer and fewer dead goblins. Whoever did this had been quite quick and purposeful in their work. Killing Curses had not been used, but something just as powerful had been.

"Severus!"

Severus turned to Dumbledore's shocked call and found his mentor pointing his wand down at one of the most feared Death Eaters of all.

"Lieutenant Bellatrix," Remus breathed.

"She's dead," Dumbledore stated after a moment, having gotten over his own surprise at seeing her there.

"H-how?" Remus asked shakily.

"I do not know," Dumbledore answered, before they heard the knocking again.

"This way," Severus said, pointing down one of the more narrow halls.

Going down it, they came to a cave in. It was blocking the entire passageway.

"Harry?" Remus yelled.

More knocking, these more frantic than before.

"Severus, cast a shield charm over us as I finish this spell," Dumbledore said.

"Yes, Hea- Albus," he said, cringing slightly as he corrected himself too late.

Dumbledore did not like being called Headmaster anymore. Hogwarts had fallen, and he didn't like being reminded.

Ignoring Severus' slip, Dumbledore motioned them back as he raised his wand. "Harry, we're getting you out!"

BOOM!

He blasted the debris back toward them, so they would not harm Harry. Severus conjured the shield and protected them.

"Harry!" Remus cried, dashing forward with Dumbledore and Snape close behind.

Harry had propped himself back against the far corner. He didn't have anything in his hands, and Severus wondered where his wand had gone. Looking around with their lit wands, they were able to make out the area to be a small chamber. It had not been a vault, but appeared to be the remains of a ceremonial chamber for the goblins.

Severus refocused on Harry, who had now slumped to the side, blood dripping out of his nose.

"Harry, what happened here?" Dumbledore asked as he knelt beside him. Remus was at his feet, while Severus was behind Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head, closing his eyes. "I. . . ." His voice shook, and an odd feeling of magic rose in air.

"Harry, please . . ." Dumbledore gently pressed. "Please, tell us what happened here."

They watched as the young man took several calming breaths before he opened his eyes and looked up at them. "I-I tried to help the Goblins, but the Death Eaters drove

us back, and she . . . the dragon. . . . And then they made it through the doors. I thought I was going to die, and. . . ."

"What, Harry? What happened?" Dumbledore asked, grabbing Harry's trembling hand.

"My wand broke," Harry stated suddenly.

"Bella broke your wand?" Remus asked softly, not that surprised the woman would do such a thing.

"N-no, I did. I cast and it . . . it crumbled in my hand."

Remus blinked in confusion, Severus frowned, and Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"It's alright, my boy, everything will be alright," Dumbledore said, leaning forward and placing his other hand on the young man's shoulder.

Harry went completely still as he raised his face, his eyes becoming remarkably and terrifyingly focused.

"I killed them, sir. I killed them. I killed them all."

"I know, Harry," Dumbledore whispered, pulling Harry to himself. "I know." With that, Harry collapsed against the former headmaster as the old man turned his eyes to his old spy. "Severus—"

"Severus? Severus?"

Severus snapped his eyes open, feeling an extremely firm hand on his shoulder as he was startled awake. He didn't pause to think, didn't take the split second to determine where or when he was, he just reacted.

Bringing his elbow up, he struck the individual's arm up and away from his shoulder before straightening his arm completely as he closed his hand into a rock hard fist, slamming it into the person's chest to push them back.

He heard the unwelcomed guest gasp in surprise as the impact no doubt knocked the breath out of them. Severus didn't wait for them to counter his surprise attack as he leapt out of his chair, whirled around, and pointed his wand at them.

He froze.

There, in the dark chambers of his living room, was Albus Dumbledore, attempting to

catch his breath with his right hand over his chest and his left lifted in surrender.

"Bloody Hell! Don't you ever do that again! I nearly blasted your head off!" Severus found himself exclaiming.

Dumbledore straightened, sufficiently recovered from Severus' attack. "I apologize, Severus, but after knocking several times at your door, and even calling your name, I received no reply. You are usually very prompt and I couldn't help but grow concerned. It is not even 10 pm, and I have known you hardly call it a night before 11. Being Headmaster, I took the liberty of entering to see if you were alright."

Severus frowned, recalling what he had dreamed and seeing how he had blended reality with his reliving of the past . . . or future. He was lucky he hadn't called Dumbledore 'Albus' a second ago, because right then he hadn't been awake enough to realize where or when he was.

"Are you alright, my boy?" Dumbledore asked after a moment.

Severus nodded. "Yes, Headmaster. I am just not accustomed to being startled awake in such a way."

"Again, I apologize. I had not intended to alarm you."

Severus waved him off, before going to the couch and sitting down again after silently inviting Dumbledore to do the same.

"You are incredibly quick and agile, Severus. One would never think anyone would be able to move so fast immediately after waking from a dead sleep," Dumbledore added as he sat down.

"Quite. So, you must have a reason for coming this late," Severus said, deciding to move away from what had happened.

Dumbledore frowned at Severus' blunt redirection of the conversation but decided to let it pass. It had not been the first time Severus had woken violently, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

"Well, I came to get your opinion on something," Dumbledore stated.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "And this, I gather, is so important to be brought to me now?"

"It is not an emergency, so do not become alarmed, I had just thought it would be

wise to get your thoughts on it, considering your previous interactions with the boy, before the holidays come any closer."

"The boy? You mean Harry Potter."

"I do."

"So? What about him? Has he done something else that needs our attention? Has Madam Pomfrey come to you with something?" Severus asked, suddenly very interested.

"No, nothing like that. I had just gotten a floo call from Augusta Longbottom informing me that Neville had asked her if he could invite Harry to their mansion for the holidays."

"And you want to know if I think it's a good idea to allow it?"

"Yes, to put it simply."

"Well, what do you think?" Severus asked, throwing the question back at him. He was curious to see where Albus' thoughts were currently.

"I am not sure. I believe Harry and Neville would both benefit from such an extended visit, but I do not know if it would be worth risking Harry's safety. We have not seen the last of Voldemort, and I would be surprised if he remained hidden for so long again. He was most displeased the last we saw him."

Severus shook his head. "Mr. Potter is not going to be completely safe anywhere. You cannot keep the boy in a cushioned box and expect him to grow into a wise, respected individual."

"Yes, Severus, I know, which is why I have come to you. If I am to allow the boy to go to the Longbottoms, I would like some assurance all will go well."

"I am not going to baby sit or shadow them, Headmaster, so if that is what you are thinking, you better think of something else."

"No, no, nothing of the sort. I would just like some ideas for guidelines I should give Augusta to set for Harry. She is already expecting something similar, I am sure, for she understands the danger the boy potentially brings with him everywhere. He is a target, after all."

"I am sure Augusta will be able to keep the boys in line and as safe as possible

without needing any outside guidelines. As for assurances, an emergency portkey would be wise, at the very least. I have already taken it upon myself to give the boy a safety necklace," Severus said before he could censure himself.

Severus resisted the urge to slam his hand to his forehead. He was too tired for this!

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "A safety necklace, Severus?"

Severus managed to appear nonchalant. "I felt it was the wise course of action to take. I told Mr. Potter to keep it on his person at all times, and he has done so. I have never detected him not wearing it, and he knows of its purpose. I doubt any adult in his conscious memory has ever provided him such a gift."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled tenderly. "Thank you, Severus. I knew coming to you was the right choice. I will call Augusta first thing tomorrow and let her know she will have a guest for the holidays."

"Glad I could help," Severus stated blandly.

The Headmaster smiled.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks again for the reviews ^^

The next part, *Broadening Horizons*, is under construction.

More Than Simply Similar

A/N: I know I had said I was going to call this Broadening Horizons, but I've changed my mind. Hope you all enjoy :)

Part 10: More Than Simply Similar

"Definitely, Neville!" Harry answered excitedly when Neville asked if he would like to spend the holidays with him at the Longbottom Mansion. "Thanks so much! This is gonna be awesome!"

Neville blushed. "I'm glad you've said yes. When I asked Gran for permission to ask, she wasn't sure you'd want to."

"Why wouldn't I? You're my best friend!" Harry exclaimed, still ecstatic about being invited and a bit louder than he normally was. They were alone at the edge of the courtyard outside, so it was okay.

Neville beamed, a small feeling of pride rising in his chest. He was someone's best friend!

"So, where do you live?" Harry asked, a bit calmer now.

"In the outskirts of Wiltshire, England, with my grandmother."

"And you call her, Gran, right?"

Neville nodded.

Harry's eyes suddenly widened, looking down at Coral. "Um, Neville, she knows about Coral, right?"

Neville nodded. "Yeah, she reads the Daily Prophet, even though she doesn't care for some of their reporters. I told her Coral and Hedwig would likely be coming with you if you said yes."

"And she's alright with Coral?"

"She just said to let you know Coral is your responsibility."

Harry nodded. "Okay."

Neville smiled, before growing serious and troubled.

Harry frowned. "Neville, what is it?"

"Well, during the holidays, at some point, we'll go . . . to visit my parents, and I, well, Gran told me you should know. . . ." Neville sighed, finding it difficult to say anything more.

Harry blinked, a bit confused. "Okay, that's fine, but I don't understand. I thought . . . well, when I learned you grew up with your grandmother, I thought you were . . . well, like me."

Neville smiled sadly. "I am. My parents live at St. Mungo's."

Harry frowned, not liking where this was going.

"Ten years ago, my parents were tortured by Death Eaters with the Cruciatus Curse. They're not . . . well, they're not themselves anymore," Neville continued softly. "And never will be."

Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry, Neville."

Neville shrugged halfheartedly. "I didn't really know them before."

"Must still be hard."

"It is," Neville admitted.

"Thank you for telling me, Neville."

They didn't speak for a long time after that.

O o O o O

Harry made his way up to the Headmaster's office. The holidays started the following day, and he was eager to leave with Neville and had already completely packed, including the medical books Madam Pomfrey had allowed him to borrow.

He didn't know why Professor Dumbledore had summoned him, but Neville said it was probably because he was going home with him for the holidays. According to Neville, his grandmother had felt it necessary to clear his visit with the Headmaster even before they formally invited him. Following the directions Professor Sprout had given him, he found himself standing in front of a stone gargoyle.

"Um, lemon drops?" Harry asked, feeling a little foolish talking to the gargoyle. However, to his surprise, it slid aside and a staircase rotated into view.

Going up, he knocked on the door.

"Come in, Harry."

Harry obeyed, recognizing Dumbledore's voice.

Entering the office, he was quickly taken with the place. There were so many gizmos and sparkling things to look at, but it didn't feel like an old museum like one would think. No, it felt very welcoming.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry looked to the front of the office, finding a large wooden desk in front of the colorfully robed Albus Dumbledore. There was a sleeping red bird on a perch beside the desk.

"Hello, sir," he said, tentatively moving forward.

"Lemon drop, Harry?" he offered, pointing to the bowl at the edge of his desk.

Harry smiled. "Thanks, sir," he said, coming to a stop at the desk.

"Feel free to sit, Harry. If you haven't already gathered, you're not in trouble."

Harry gave a relieved smile. He had been pretty sure he wasn't in trouble, but it was still nice to be told for certain.

"Well, I've been told you'll be spending the holidays with Augusta and Neville Longbottom."

"Yes, sir."

"I trust you are fully packed?"

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes twinkling before he grew a little more serious. Standing up, he moved to one of the shelves behind his desk. Lifting his hand to one of the finely crafted boxes, Harry noticed that the Headmaster's hand was carefully wrapped with a white cloth.

:I can taste faint traces of dried blood in the air: Coral hissed quietly. :I believe the Headmaster has somehow injured himself:

Harry nodded mutely, wondering what had happened and why the Headmaster hadn't already healed himself. Surely the headmaster could cast a simple healing charm?

Dumbledore turned back around, holding a small, simple medallion that could be attached to a necklace or bracelet. There was a phoenix at the center of the white metal and etchings of a strange language around the rim.

"I would like you to wear this from now on, Harry. It is an emergency portkey. It will activate if your life force drops suddenly for whatever reason or if you say *Fawkes' base*. It will bring you here and alert Madam Pomfrey and I to your arrival."

Harry blinked.

"This is just a precaution, Harry. I understand that Professor Snape spoke to you about the need for such things?"

Harry nodded slowly, taking the medallion and seeing a little hook at the top that could easily be secured to the necklace Snape had given him. Swiftly, he latched it to the silver chain around his neck before burying it back under his robes.

Dumbledore smiled, placing his hands on the desk. Once again, Harry's eyes were drawn to the white bandage on the old wizard's hand. The headmaster noticed where his gaze was and smiled softly.

"The other reason I called you here was for me to personally see how far you have come in parselmagic." He moved his injured hand and began unfastening the bandage.

"What happened, sir?"

"I was a little careless while traveling through the forest a few days ago. Normally, I would have cured the cut straight away, but then I became curious. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to treat this. I have been told by Madam Pomfrey that you have treated a number of your peers, and, as they are my students, I would like to experience your good work firsthand."

Harry got up from his seat and moved closer to the desk to get a better look. Dumbledore turned his chair and motioned for Harry to come around the desk.

Looking at the Headmaster's hand, which was now completely uncovered, Harry found a long gash along the bottom portion of the old palm. It was red and swollen around the raw edges and Harry instantly knew it was infected. Harry was also able

to conclude that whatever had caused the cut had been blunt and jagged.

"Well, sir, it looks infected, but it shouldn't be any problem. Do you want it to be numb for when I heal it?" Harry asked, falling into the 'professional mode' Madam Pomfrey had mentioned him taking whenever he treated someone.

"You can do that?" Dumbledore asked, a little surprised.

Harry nodded. "It's not that hard. My magic just temporarily covers the nerves, blocking the pain signals."

"I see. Well, don't worry about doing that. I'll be fine without it," he said lightly.

Harry nodded, not that surprised the Headmaster turned down the offer. Most of the guys he healed turned the numbing option away. When he had healed Fred Weasley the previous week, George, his twin, had said accepting such a thing would be girly.

Harry glanced up at Dumbledore's face before taking the injured hand in his right and moving his left with Coral around his wrist over it.

"It'll probably twinge a bit when my magic takes care of the infection, but it shouldn't hurt much more than that," he stated simply.

Dumbledore nodded, watching intently.

Harry wondered if this was more of a test than a curious request. No matter, he supposed it was the Headmaster's right to make sure he was making sufficient progress in parselmagic. Who knew how much the Board was really concerned with it all, and he didn't want anyone to think he wasn't working as hard as he could in magic.

:Wound, cleanse; cut, heal: he hissed.

He felt the muscles in Dumbledore's hand stiffen slightly when he stretched out his magic and took hold of the Headmaster's, quickly overwhelming the infection and healing the wound. He watched the flesh mend back together, leaving no scar or evidence of the gash ever having been there.

Dumbledore closed and reopened his hand, testing the healing job. He smiled.

"Very impressive, Harry. Well done."

"It was no trouble, sir."

Dumbledore looked to Coral. "And thank you, Madam Coral."

Coral straightened in obvious pride, basking in the attention. Harry smirked, amused.

"She says, 'you're welcome,'" Harry translated.

Dumbledore gave her a brief, appreciative nod before looking back to Harry. "Well, my boy, enjoy the winter break, and Happy Holidays."

O o O o O

The train ride to the station passed by quickly, and before Harry knew it, they were getting off the train and hurrying toward a ghastly looking old woman standing near the area where the students got off to rejoin their families for the holidays.

"That's my Gran, with the vulture hat. Come on, she doesn't like waiting," Neville said breathlessly, pulling his bag behind him while trying to keep Trevor in his breast pocket.

Harry managed to keep up beside him, dragging his suitcase behind him with Hedwig's cage balancing on top.

"Good evening, Gran," Neville said, standing at attention just three feet in front of her.

"Neville," she said, lifting her nose slightly.

Neville quickly cleared his throat, putting his things down as he turned toward Harry. "Gran, let me introduce you to Harry Potter, my friend and fellow Hufflepuff. Harry, this is my grandmother, Augusta Longbottom, matriarch of my family."

Harry held out his right hand, keeping Coral behind his back and out of sight. She took his hand as she sized him up. Harry kept himself tall and straight. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom. Thank you for having me this holiday."

She nodded stiffly, but it seemed that she approved of what she found.

"We will be dropping your things off at the mansion first, and then we will be going to Diagon Alley," she said, holding out a handkerchief. "Take hold, both of you, and make sure you have a good hold on your belongings. We will not be returning here if you leave anything behind."

Harry and Neville quickly did as they were told, though Harry gave Neville a questioning look.

Just as he took hold of the cloth, Harry managed to make out Neville mouthing, 'portkey' in answer to his silent question. Suddenly, with all of his belongings with him, he felt himself yanked aside, before landing precariously on gravel.

"First time, I see," Mrs. Longbottom said as Neville helped Harry up.

"Yes, ma'am," he managed, rubbing the side of his arm that had rammed against the side of his suitcase. Hedwig was disheveled and unpleased with being in the cage that was now on its side. Harry quickly corrected this before standing up and looking around them.

They were on a gravel road that led to a massive mansion in the middle of a prairie. It was a gorgeous place, and Harry could see side buildings branching off of the grand, well-groomed property.

"You did much better than Neville had his first time, Mr. Potter," Mrs. Longbottom stated, before looking to their things. "Just leave everything. The house elves will take care of it. Now, both of you, take my arm. We are going to apparate to the alley."

Still somewhat dazed from the portkey, Harry managed to do as he was told with Neville, though he had no idea what 'apparate' meant.

"Hold on," Neville whispered, just as everything swirled like a horrible kaleidoscope of whirling chaos that simply made him want to vomit as he was smashed on all sides.

They landed, though Harry didn't know when they had launched.

"Alright there, Harry?" Neville asked, patting his back.

Harry swallowed as he found himself hunched over, fighting back the bile that wanted to come forth. Slowly, he nodded. "Y-yeah, though I think I nearly lost that chocolate frog."

"Never would have thought a Hufflepuff would have a stomach of steel, Mr. Potter," Mrs. Longbottom said, her tone neither light nor heavy as she looked down at him.

"Yeah, well, most wouldn't think a Hufflepuff could be a parselmouth either, but here I am," he said, still hunched over and trying to calm his stomach.

:Careful, Harry. Mind your tone. I don't think she appreciated such a retort: Coral said

from within his sleeve.

:It wasn't a retort, it was a fact: Harry hissed under his breath.

It came out as a slight wheeze, so Mrs. Longbottom thought nothing of it. Neville, however, recognized the sound and knew he had spoken to Coral in his sleeve.

Finally, Harry straightened, no longer afraid of spewing things everywhere. He quickly gathered that they were at the edge of Diagon Alley, out of the paths of shoppers and near the alley's entrance where the Leaky Cauldron was.

"Well, now that you have sufficiently recovered, we have something to pick up," Mrs. Longbottom said, leading the way down the alley and to Mr. Ollivander's.

Neville's eyes widened in happiness and Harry could feel his friend's magic ebbing with joy.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. I admit, I was not expecting to see you again so soon," Mr. Ollivander said, stepping seemingly from nowhere just as they entered.

"Hello, Mr. Ollivander," Harry said as the old creepy man turned his attention to the Longbottoms.

"Madam Longbottom, so nice to see you again. Pine, dragon heartstring, thirteen inches. I trust your wand has been behaving itself?"

"Yes, Mr. Ollivander, but could we get on to business? My grandson needs a new wand. His father's is not a good match for him, unfortunately," she said, her voice growing cold as if it was Neville's fault that the wand didn't work well with him.

Neville looked down, ashamed. Harry's jaw clenched.

:Easy, Harry: Coral soothed.

"Yes, well, the wand chooses the wizard, you know. Not much you can do about that," Ollivander said, slightly uneasily.

"Yes, quite," Mrs. Longbottom stated with a barely hidden huff.

Ollivander then shuffled forward, measuring Neville just as he had Harry months ago.

"I had to try a lot of different wands, Neville. It took me a long time, but Professor Snape said it just takes a bit longer for some wizards."

Neville nodded grimly as Ollivander began having him try wand after wand, all the while Mrs. Longbottom stood impatiently by the door.

Harry went over to the wand holster rack and picked up a black leather one similar to his.

"Hey, Neville, are you going to keep your dad's wand?" Harry asked suddenly.

Neville paused, glancing at his grandmother. "Er. . . ."

"It will be going back into storage. Perhaps a future Longbottom will actually make use out of my son's wand," she said curtly.

Neville looked down and placed his hand solemnly on his pocket. Harry knew this was where he kept his father's wand.

"Hmm, well, why not let Neville keep it as a secondary for now?" Harry asked, growing bold. "At least then it will be getting used occasionally and not gathering dust."

"Perhaps such an arrangement would not be unwise," she stated.

Harry took a second wand holster from the rack.

"Mr. Potter, what are you doing?" Mrs. Longbottom asked, noticing the two items in his hand.

"Professor Snape says wand holsters are important to have and that every sensible witch and wizard uses them," Harry said, moving to the counter and pulling out a galleon to pay for them. They were 9 sickles a piece and one galleon for two.

Ollivander nodded appreciatively at Harry, seeing him put the payment on the front counter, as he left for the back to gather more wands for Neville to try.

"Here, Neville, you put this one on the inner forearm of your wand-arm, like this," he said, pulling up his own sleeve to show him his holster that held his main wand. "And this one," he began, kneeling down and swiftly lifting the pant of Neville's left leg to secure the second holster, ignoring the fact Mrs. Longbottom was watching him. "You put on your calf. Wizards underestimate opponents they believe they have disarmed."

"Harry, you didn't have to get me these," Neville began, embarrassed as Harry stood up after securing the holster on his leg. "I mean, I'm glad you did, but—"

Harry waved him off. "Consider them early Christmas presents, Neville. You're my friend, it's no problem."

Mrs. Longbottom blinked as Neville nodded numbly.

"Alright!" Ollivander stated, coming out with a few more boxes of wands. "Let's try these."

Neville tried a few more, each failing to be a good match at all, until finally . . . he came to a dark wand.

Golden sparks burst forth from the tip, the strongest reaction Neville had gotten from any wand ever, and they all instantly knew he had found the wand for him.

"Wow," Neville breathed.

"Holly, eleven inches, unicorn tail hair," Ollivander announced, looking fondly at the wand before glancing at Harry. "Quite fitting."

"My wand is Holly, eleven inches too, Neville," Harry said.

"There's a bit more than that simple similarity, Mr. Potter," Ollivander put in. "You see, this wand and your wand have been made from the very same tree and cut to the same length. I daresay the two of you will be quite close for the rest of your lives."

"So, our wands are brothers?" Harry asked, a bit uneasily, considering his wand was already a brother of Voldemort's.

"Oh, I would go further and say twins. Unlike other brother wands that have cores that have come from the same animal, the holly gathered and used for your wands were not only from the same tree, but from the same *branch*. That is quite rare, for usually only a single wand can be made from a branch, not two. It will be interesting to see where you both are in twenty years."

Harry and Neville looked at each other, not knowing what to think. With that, Mrs. Longbottom paid for Neville's wand, not saying much before she apparated them all back to the mansion.

"Show him around the mansion, Neville, and then make sure there is nothing he needs for his room. Call one of the elves if there is something," Mrs. Longbottom said, already walking out of the room.

"Yes, Gran," Neville said obediently before looking to Harry. "This way."

Harry happily followed.

The mansion had a rather stiff feeling, and Harry wondered if all mansions had to feel so cold. It wasn't cold temperature wise, but emotionally cold. The whole place just had this creepy feel to it, and the fact that there were moving portraits had nothing to do with it. It was the atmosphere. Everything was perfect and clean, to the point Harry had to wonder if anyone actually lived there at all. It was a bit unnerving.

Neville showed him the living room and dining room, followed by the kitchen and library, and then finally the bedrooms and bathrooms. Neville only showed him the first two floors, telling Harry that the top floor was just more bedrooms and studies.

"And this, is my room," Neville said, pride entering his voice for the first time Harry had ever known him.

It was a small, simple room, but neat and comfortable. There were dressers against the wall with a closet in the corner and a window a few feet to the right. There were two unmoving portraits by the door, slightly hidden by one of the tall dressers, so one had to step directly in line with it to see them. Neville's things from school were on the bed.

"It's brilliant," Harry said, taking note of the plant books stacked on the short dresser and a few items scattered about on top of them.

Neville smiled, happy his room got his friend's approval.

"You'll be sleeping next door, I'll show you now. The bathroom is across the hall," he continued, beginning to exit the room.

Harry began to follow Neville, but paused at the unmoving portraits, quickly seeing their resemblance to Neville.

"Oh," Neville said, stepping back. "Those are my parents. They had gotten their portraits made a few weeks before it happened."

Harry nodded slowly, suddenly wondering what his parents looked like. He had never even seen a picture.

"I don't have a picture of my parents," Harry admitted quietly. "The Dursley's didn't have any, or at least they didn't show them to me. Hrph, they probably burned any they did have."

Neville straightened, and Harry wondered if Neville was becoming angry for him. After a moment, Neville spoke. "Well, I don't think I have any of your dad, but I think I have some of your mum. Uh, our mums were friends, or at least that's what Gran had told me once."

Harry's eyes widened. "You have some pictures? I'd love to see them."

"I'll ask Gran where my mum's old school pictures are; there must be a few of your mum in there," Neville promised.

Harry couldn't thank Neville enough when he was able to get the pictures from the attic later that day. Sure enough, their mothers had been friends, and, if the amount of pictures with them together were anything to go by, they were best friends.

"Uh, Neville, I'm just curious, do you have your mum's wand?" Harry asked as they met up in Harry's room after unpacking their things.

Neville shook his head sadly. "No, one of the Death Eaters snapped it that day."

"Oh. My father's wand had gotten destroyed too. Professor Snape told me it couldn't be recovered from Godric's Hollow."

"Do you have your mother's wand?" Neville asked, suddenly curious.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, it's my secondary wand, but don't tell anyone. I have it on my calf."

"Don't worry, I won't tell. Remember, I have a secondary too," Neville said with a smile. "I think it's pretty cool we have twin wands."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, and I think your grandmother was as surprised as we were."

Neville laughed. "Yeah, I saw her face. You know, when I first wrote to her about inviting you for Christmas, I don't think she believed we were friends."

"She underestimates you, you know that, right?"

Neville shrugged. "For a while she was afraid I was a squib. Great Uncle Algie kept on trying to get me to do accidental magic. I had nearly drowned once."

Harry frowned. "Madam Pomfrey told me magical children show signs of magic in different ways, and not always obviously. How often did you get sick?"

"Hmm, well, not a whole lot. Maybe once a year, if that."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "And when you got hurt, how long would it take you to get better?"

Neville squinted his eyes, thinking back. "You know, not very long at all. I had broken my wrist once, and it was fine in a few days."

Harry smiled. "Your magic is what Madam Pomfrey calls 'introvert'. She was telling me these things when I was reading 'Controlling Your Inner Magic.' You can read it if you want. I've finished with it."

"Okay, thanks."

"For some people, their magic expresses itself sporadically in times of stress; for others, like you, it turns inwards." Harry paused before giving a small chuckle. "You know, it might be why you're so good with plants. Things that you work on with your hands can be affected by the magic swirling just under your skin."

"That's so neat," Neville said, before tilting his head at Harry. "What sort of magic do you have?"

Harry blinked. "Hmm, I don't know. I haven't really gotten sick before. Sniffles and stuff, but nothing serious, which is really fortunate. I don't see Aunt Petunia ever fixing chicken noodle soup for me. And when I get hurt I heal pretty quick. So with that I'm like you, but I've had some pretty . . . strong incidents of accidental magic."

"Oh?" Neville asked, intrigued.

Harry shrugged. "I've appeared on a roof after being chased by my cousin and his friends; I've made my hair re-grow and turned my teacher's hair blue. That sort of thing."

"There was also that time with Smith in our dorm room," Neville reminded him.

"Oh yeah, and that."

"Maybe you're both," Neville suggested.

"I suppose it's possible. With black and white, there's also gray."

"Well, dinner is going to be ready soon. We should go get washed up," Neville said, standing up.

O o O o O

Severus placed the cork in the first flask for Harry before casting the preservation spell on it. Placing it carefully in the box to be mailed later that same hour, Severus smiled softly as he turned to begin pouring the next potion into the second flask.

This was the last of the aggressive potion regimen he had set for Harry. Finally, after five months of potions, Severus was confident Harry had recovered fully from his treatment at the Dursleys and would suffer no lasting physical or magical ill effects.

Severus had already seen an improvement, and if the other professors looked closely at the boy they would see it too. Harry had filled out a bit. Where his arms had been frail looking, he now had lean, young, boyish muscle. He was still thin, but it was a natural thin. The thin his father had been at his age, toned and lean. Severus felt an odd bit of pride rise in his chest. He had done this.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called, already knowing who was there.

"Hello, Severus," Remus said, carefully entering his lab.

"Lupin," he returned, before turning to get Remus' Wolfsbane potion.

Severus knew Remus was having a hard time reading him, and that was the way he liked it. He had played nice since Remus' arrival, but hadn't been warm and inviting either. He knew being too friendly would be suspicious, even though a part of him wouldn't mind becoming friends with the werewolf again, as he had been with him years in the future.

"Thank you, Severus," Remus said, taking the potion Severus was now holding for him to take.

Severus nodded before refocusing on the box he would soon be sending to Harry. He placed the second flask in after waving his wand over it.

Remus cleared his throat, obviously wanting to say something.

"Yes, Lupin?" Severus asked, his voice neither cold nor kind. It just was.

"It's not really my business, but I'm curious. . . . Every time I've come down here, I've seen you brewing these potions as you are now, though I've never seen you pouring them into flasks before. Are you taking orders from people outside the castle?" he asked. Evidently, Severus' neutral attitude toward him for the last few months invited him to be slightly nosey.

"That is an interesting idea, but no, this is not an order I've taken for some sort of covert business I'm running in lieu of being a professor," Snape answered, before pausing, wondering what he should reveal, if anything.

"Oh, I see," Remus said, a little disappointed at not being told more.

"If you must know, it is for a student, and no, I am not charging them."

Remus blinked. "A student? And they're for them to take every week? Isn't that a bit . . . I mean, those potions seem pretty serious."

"They're to repair and prevent serious problems," Severus stated simply, moving back to the last flask.

"Does the Headmaster know about this?" Remus asked suddenly, though it was obvious he regretted his quick words the moment they were out.

Severus stared at him, raising an eyebrow. "Yes. I informed him I would be providing this regimen for the student and why. He trusted my judgment and has left me to care for the student as I see fit. In fact, this is the last batch the student will need to take, at least as far as I can tell for the moment."

"Well, that's good," Remus said, slightly uneasily, afraid he had offended the potions master and botched any hope of becoming a friendly acquaintance instead of a tolerated peer.

"I am slightly surprised you haven't questioned me about this sooner," Severus stated after a moment, closing the box after placing the last flask in, along with a sealed letter.

Remus looked taken aback at the statement. "Well, I have been wondering for some time, but as it wasn't my place to ask. . . ."

"But you have asked today."

"Er . . . yes. I suppose my curiosity had gotten the better of me."

"It . . . was not an unreasonable question," Severus stated, a little hesitantly.

Remus smiled softly. "I'm glad I didn't offend."

"I am not so easily offended as I once was, Lupin."

Remus stared at him for a moment, getting a strange look in his eye Severus

couldn't identify.

"Yeah, I've noticed," he said slowly, before shaking his head. "You really have turned out to be the better man. I doubt I, James or. . . ." He sighed, not able to mention Sirius. "Well, I doubt we would have been as . . . gracious as you have been to me if situations had been reversed."

Severus turned his back to Remus, securing the package to his eagle owl. "Perhaps," he whispered.

"Thanks again for the potion, Severus," Remus said, before taking his leave.

O o O o O

Harry chugged the three potions he had become accustomed to drinking every week. Having finished the last potion, he turned his attention to the Professor's letter.

Mr. Potter,

I am sure you will be pleased to learn you will no longer be receiving any more of the three potions you have undoubtedly just chugged. I am confident you have recovered and are no longer in danger of suffering lasting effects from your previous home life. However, this does not mean I want to learn you have been relaxing in the care of yourself and so have hampered yourself in reaching your full potential. I will be most displeased if such things occur.

Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master

Harry refolded the letter and placed it back in the box with a smile.

"I will take care of myself and I will reach my potential, Professor, I promise," he said quietly, alone in his room.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he said, putting the box away in his trunk.

"Morning, Harry," Neville said. "Oh, you got mail?"

"Yeah, it came this morning through my window," Harry said, moving on to the dark green envelope he had skipped over to open the package from Professor Snape first.

"Gran wanted me to let you know we'll be going to St. Mungo's tomorrow to visit my

parents," Neville said, much more at ease in telling that to Harry than he would have been with anyone else.

"Okay," Harry said, not really knowing what else to say.

Harry began opening the letter, seeing his name boldly scripted on the front.

Neville shuffled his feet nervously. "Um, Harry?"

"Yeah, Neville?" he asked, looking up.

"I was wondering if . . . well, if you could do something for me?"

"Yeah, sure, what is it?"

Neville grew still and broke Harry's gaze. "My parents. You can sense what is wrong with someone. I'd like you to. . . ."

"Diagnose your parents?"

Neville nodded. "I don't expect you to be able to make them better. Dozens of Healers have tried to treat them, but. . . ." He sighed, defeated.

"I'll see what is wrong, and, if I think I might be able to, I will try to help them. I promise."

Neville smiled, fighting back tears. "Thank you, Harry. I know it's silly, but . . . I. . . . Despite everything I know, I think the Healers have it wrong, and part of me hopes there is something that can be done."

"What makes you think the Healers have it wrong?"

"My mum, she responds to me. She even . . . she gives me little things. She never even acknowledges anyone else. That has to mean something."

Harry nodded in understanding. "Okay, Neville. Tomorrow, I will see what I can learn. Maybe the Healers have missed something, and I can tell them."

Neville smiled, unable to say anything. Harry looked back down to the letter and opened it.

To Mister Harry James Potter

You are cordially invited to join the Malfoy family for their annual Christmas Party

December 23rd

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire, England

4 – 11 pm

Dinner and drinks will be provided

Formal attire

Harry blinked, before another sheet of paper fell from the envelope.

Hey Harry,

Hope your holiday is going well so far, and hope to see you at the party. Normally they can be pretty dull, but with you there it's sure to be much better, so just RSVP before next week if you can come.

Your friend,

Draco

"Well, this is interesting," Harry said.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks again for the reviews ^^ And Happy Holidays.

I know this part could be considered short, but I will try to post again real soon.

In the works, *Visits of Monumental Purpose*.

Visits of Monumental Purpose

A/N: *Augusta's Coldness* – Yes, she is a bit cold . . . but remember, Neville wasn't sorted into Gryffindor this time and it's still first year. The first time we had officially met her in canon was in the fifth book. Her views on Neville had likely softened a tiny bit over his school years. Also recall, Neville was afraid of her, even in his third year. There has to be a reason for that.

Part 11: Visits of Monumental Purpose

Harry and Neville hurried to keep up with Mrs. Longbottom.

The previous day had been a little weird, but after writing to Professor Snape about his invitation to the Malfoy Christmas party, he was no longer as concerned about it. . . .

Mr. Potter,

You were right to bring this to me, but I don't believe you need to be as worried with it as you are. I have also been invited and will be attending. If you wish, I can arrange to pick you up from the Longbottoms at noon so you will not need to organize your own transportation. At that time, I could take you to Diagon Alley for you to purchase formal robes, as I am sure you do not yet own any.

As for your questions, I believe the answers need a bit of explanation before I simply give them to you. You have saved the life of the Malfoy family heir. You have not simply saved the life of a friend or a fellow student, but the life of one of the most prodigious families in Europe.

You need to remember this fact, and understand the magical and political implications of this. Draco Malfoy now has a life-debt owed to you, just as any life you directly save would; however, being the family heir, his family also owes this debt to you. There is nothing you can do about this fact. You cannot wave it away or forgive it. It is a magically binding life-debt that can only be repaid by the act of Draco saving your life.

Now, there is a bit more to the relationship between the debtor and the beneficiary (you), but for right now, this is what you really need to know and understand. . . .

Being the beneficiary of the life-debt, the Malfoy family will be inclined to honor you in the most public ways, as it is expected of them and would be greatly frowned upon if they neglected to do so. As such, you will be expected to graciously receive the

honors bestowed to you. Failure to do so will send a very strong message to the Malfoys and other families. It will tell them you do not believe the life you saved is worth such gratitude, and it is a severe insult and has far reaching consequences. It could financially and politically harm the Malfoy family's position in the wizarding world, crippling their influence and undoing the work of their forefathers. To put it simply, in rejecting their gratitude, you could crush the future of the Malfoy line. Lucius Malfoy will do everything in his power to prevent this, as he should.

I understand much of this sounds a bit extreme, and I agree with you, but the wizarding world is trenched with tradition and often times it surpasses all reason and logic. Understand, you yourself are an heir to a prestigious family, and your word holds weight because of that.

So, with the above explanation, I can now answer your questions. Yes, I believe you should accept the invitation and attend the party. No, you cannot bring Neville with you. He did not receive an invitation and I highly doubt Mrs. Longbottom would allow him to go even if he had received one. Yes, Mrs. Longbottom will allow you to go. She understands the situation and knows (like every influential family head in the Wizengamot and the wizarding world) of the life-debt the Malfoys owe to you. It would be dishonorable of her to deny you. Yes, a small party gift would be appropriate. Yes, bring Coral with you. As I said before, you are to have her with you everywhere you go (along with that necklace and your wands). This especially includes locations away from Hogwarts. I believe I have now answered all of your questions. If you have any more, do not hesitate to send them to me.

Notify me once you have decided whether or not you will be attending the party so I can make the appropriate travel arrangements.

Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master

Harry did as Professor Snape had suggested, accepting the Malfoys' invitation and informing the professor and Mrs. Longbottom he would be attending the party. Mrs. Longbottom had simply nodded her head, as if what he was saying was old news.

Neville had already expressed his concerns, but quickly calmed when he learned Professor Snape would be at the party with him.

And so they were now on their way to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, walking along a street in London. Finally, coming to an abandoned red brick department store called Purge and Dowse, Ltd., Mrs. Longbottom stopped and led them to the front window where a dummy was. It was dressed in rather outlandish and outdated clothes, but it moved a bit when Mrs. Longbottom stepped in front of it.

"We're here to visit family," she stated.

The dummy gave a slight nod, and with that, she stepped *through* the window. Harry quickly shook himself before following behind Neville the next instant.

Harry found himself in a rather disorganized reception area that seemed to double as a waiting area and visitor's entrance. It was obvious the place was a hospital, but it was the most bizarre one Harry had ever seen, in person and from the telly.

People were sitting in chairs against the walls, no doubt waiting for treatment, and many of them were obviously in need of some aid. Particularly the man with an arm sticking out of his head. Other people in uniform lime green robes were moving busily throughout the room, leading people from the area or directing them to continue waiting where they were. It was the most organized chaotic operation Harry had ever seen.

Suddenly, a plump, blond woman in white was there, greeting Mrs. Longbottom.

She looked a bit haggard, as if she had been working there since before midnight, but seemed to be forcing herself to be alert and pleasant towards Mrs. Longbottom. Harry didn't blame her. He was certain he would manage a polite greeting even with a broken back if it meant preventing Mrs. Longbottom from turning nasty.

So far, she had been cordial to him, but Harry was sure Mrs. Longbottom was a woman not to be crossed or insulted in any way. Not if you wanted to live.

"Of course, Mrs. Longbottom," the welcome woman said. "Visit as long as you wish."

Harry and Neville silently followed, passing the sick, injured, or confused people in the waiting room.

Going toward the elevator, Harry spotted a floor guide on a wall.

Ground Floor: Artifact Accidents
(Cauldron explosion, wand-backfiring, broom crashes, etc.)

First Floor: Creature-Induced Injuries
(Bites, stings, burns, embedded spiders, etc.)

Second Floor: Magical Bugs
(Contagious maladies, e.g., dragon pox, vanishing sickness, scrofungulus)

Third Floor: Potion and Plant Poisoning

(Rashes, regurgitation, uncontrollable giggling, etc.)

Fourth Floor: Spell Damage
(Unliftable jinxes, hexes, and incorrectly applied charms, etc.)

Fifth Floor: Visitor's Tearoom and Hospital Shop

"We're going to the Janus Thickey Ward on the fourth floor," Neville said as the elevator began moving.

Harry nodded.

"When did Neville tell you about his parents, Mr. Potter?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

"About a week ago," Harry answered honestly, not really seeing a reason not to be.

Suddenly, she rounded on Neville. "Really, Neville, are you so ashamed of your parents that you would wait so long to tell your friend about them? I'm disappointed in you."

Neville put his head down and stared at the floor. The elevator had just reached the second floor.

"I'm sure that's not the reason, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry put in, trying to divert her penetrating gaze away from poor Neville. "I-I don't really like telling people about what happened to my parents. At my muggle school, I didn't really tell anyone that they were gone. I didn't want them to feel sorry for me. It had nothing to do with how I felt about what happened to them."

"Just the same. Knowing your parents suffered a similar fate should have made him realize he shouldn't hide what had happened to them, least of all to you. It was a good thing I told him to tell you if he hadn't already in my last letter to him, even though I had thought he had." She shook her head and looked to the elevator door that was just beginning to open, acting as if Neville wasn't there.

Harry looked at Neville who had yet to lift up his head. Harry gently bumped his arm with his hand, allowing Coral to briefly touch Neville, reminding him of Harry's promise.

Neville straightened at that, lifting his head and looking straight ahead while mouthing, 'thanks.'

Going down the hall on the fourth floor was weird. There were portraits of old

Healers and doors with little windows. Harry didn't even try to look inside any of them. He had heard about insane asylums and didn't want anything to confirm what he imagined.

"Good morning, Mrs. Longbottom, so good to see you, dear. Alice has been getting a little anxious lately. Perhaps your and Neville's visit will help," a grandmotherly Healer said, coming down the hall to meet them. "Oh, and who is this child?" she asked, looking at Harry.

"This is Harry Potter, a friend of my grandson's," Mrs. Longbottom said simply.

The Healer's eyes widened. "Mr. Potter?" she quickly moved forward and took his hand. "I am Healer Miriam Strout. I oversee this ward. It is wonderful to meet you."

"Thanks," Harry said uncertainly. "It's nice to meet you too."

"I have heard you have already begun practicing healing. If you have any questions about what it's like to be a Healer, just come to me. I'll be happy to share."

"Thanks, I might do that."

She smiled, before glancing at Mrs. Longbottom. "Well, I will get out of your way. You have some visiting to do."

With that, she unlocked the door for them and stepped aside.

The room was spotless, but not entirely drab with sanitation. There were some old drawings pinned on the wall. Harry was able to make out scribbly little N's and L's under colorful stick figures and the like. He quickly gathered they were old pictures Neville had drawn for his parents when he was really young.

There were two beds, one with a man laying in it. He was staring up at the ceiling, totally out of it.

"Hello, mum," Neville said.

Harry turned, finding a woman standing near the far wall, rocking slightly. Harry watched Neville approach her as Mrs. Longbottom remained silent by the door.

"It's the winter holidays, and Gran has brought me and my friend, Harry Potter, to visit," he said softly. "Do you want to meet him?"

She remained where she was but she stilled slightly. Neville waved Harry over.

"Mum, this is Harry, my best friend."

Harry came to a stop beside Neville, almost directly in front of her. "Hello, Mrs. Longbottom."

She didn't look up, didn't say anything, and didn't respond in any noticeable way.

Neville looked behind him to his Gran and to the Healers nearby. None of them were really paying any attention. He glanced at Harry. Harry gave a slight nod.

"Harry's going to shake your hand, Mum. I've been wanting him to meet you since I've told him about you and dad," Neville said, taking hold of his mum's left hand and moving it toward Harry.

Harry took it, allowing Coral to shift forward ever so slightly.

:What's wrong?: Harry whispered, before being bull rushed with a dozen images at once, but they were all strangely clear, every single one passing before him in his mind's eye as her entire body gave a slight glow to him.

Squinting his eyes, Harry focused on zeroing in on the main issue, willing his magic to show him the way to best help her. He was also vaguely aware of Neville standing very close to him, keeping him steady as images filled his mind.

He was shown close up snapshots of nerve endings in her fingers, branches of nerves going up her arms and linking up in her shoulder and back before he was shown her spinal cord. All along the nerves were patches of scar tissue, and in certain areas of her body the nerves themselves were completely shredded. Continuing his search, he was finally shown her brain. With very little knowledge of the organ, Harry could only commit to memory everything he was being shown to the best of his ability. He didn't know what much of it meant, and didn't know what he could do with any of it — yet, but he continued to see, made himself focus on the darkened clusters of fiber-like strands throughout her brain near blood vessels that were surrounded by tiny bulging globs he was able to conclude were more collections of scar tissue.

How on earth was he supposed to heal this?

Blinking, he stepped back and swallowed. What he was able to conclude with what he had been shown was that Neville's mother had suffered a large amount of nerve damage and severe brain trauma.

"Harry?" Neville whispered.

Harry shook his head a little. "It's going to take me some time to work out everything I have been shown, Neville," he answered quietly. "There's a lot of nerve and brain trauma."

"Mr. Potter?" Healer Strout asked, coming toward them. "I trust . . . I trust you are not attempting any sort of parselmagic treatments?"

"Uh. . . ." Harry managed, hoping Coral was out of sight.

"No, Healer Strout," Neville said quickly. "He's not. I've told him my parents' condition is . . . untreatable. He was just introducing himself."

"Oh, well . . . very well then. I had to make sure, you understand. I can't risk any sort of accidents that might occur with such an attempt," she said as Mrs. Longbottom looked toward them, wondering what the fuss was all about.

"We understand, ma'am. I was just introducing myself," Harry said, secretly relieved by Neville's quick answer.

She nodded and stepped back once again so their visit could continue unhampered.

Harry didn't try to diagnose Neville's dad, and Neville didn't try to get him to. For the next thirty minutes, Harry sat quietly next to Neville as he simply spoke to his parents. He told them about school so far, including when Harry had saved Draco's life. They didn't look at him and didn't appear to be listening, but that didn't seem to bother Neville at all.

"Neville, Mr. Potter. I believe it is time to go," Mrs. Longbottom said, interrupting Neville mid-sentence.

Neville stood up and nodded, used to being cut off. Harry followed suit and began to follow Mrs. Longbottom out, but turned back when he noticed Neville wasn't with him.

His mother had stood up and was holding something out for him to take. Neville quickly took the item from her hand and stuffed it in his pocket before his Gran could see.

"Come along, Neville," Mrs. Longbottom called at the door.

"Yes, Gran," Neville said obediently.

Harry didn't say anything.

Stepping out from the elevator, they began heading back toward the entrance to leave when a man ran right into them.

"Mrs. Longbottom!" he exclaimed, shifting out of the way just in time, only to run into Harry instead.

Harry stumbled back, but managed to catch himself on the wall.

"Oh! I am so sorry, young man!" he cried, hurrying forward to dust Harry off, even though he wasn't dirty.

"I'm alright," Harry said, hoping Coral wouldn't take the man's actions as hostile.

"Healer Smethwyk," Mrs. Longbottom stated, unbothered by his entrance.

The man attempted to calm himself and look presentable under her gaze as he turned toward her.

"Yes?"

"It is uncustomary to see you running about in such a careless manner, and for you to run into my grandson's friend, I do hope you can explain yourself," she said.

The man looked absolutely ashamed.

"I do apologize, Madam," he said. "I had just been told something and wanted—" He paused as his eyes fell on Harry. "Harry Potter?"

Harry barely stopped himself from sighing heavily.

"Yes, he is," Mrs. Longbottom stated.

The man suddenly looked ten times more apologetic. "Oh, I am so sorry! I cannot believe I ran into you, *you,* of all people!"

"It's alright, sir, really. No one was hurt," Harry said, embarrassed and nervous about all the attention he was suddenly getting from people looking in from the waiting room and from down the halls.

"Oh, you must let me make it up to you," the man continued. "I'll give you a tour! Yes! I've heard you've been practically apprenticed under my old friend, Poppy Pomfrey, using your parsel ability to heal. Yes! You must let me give you a tour, at the very least. I may even be able to allow you some practice. It's the least I could do for you. After all, Poppy and I went to the university together, you understand, and it would

be remiss of me to not provide this opportunity to you, her student," he said quickly before looking to Mrs. Longbottom, a little nervous.

Harry blinked while Neville tried not to gape.

"It is up to Mr. Potter," Mrs. Longbottom stated.

"I'd like that very much, sir," Harry said. "As long as it is alright, Mrs. Longbottom?"

"It is, Mr. Potter. It's nice to see a young man able to make something of himself," she said.

Neville's shoulders slouched. Harry forced himself from narrowing his eyes at her, wishing there was a way to get back at her for Neville.

"Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry said, before focusing on Neville. "Come on, Neville, maybe we'll see some plants being used in a treatment."

"We sometimes do use herbs and plants," the healer said excitedly, before facing Mrs. Longbottom. "They'll be safe with me, Mrs. Longbottom, if you don't wish to join us; you have my word."

She gave a short nod.

"Please, follow me. We'll start on this floor," he said happily.

Not bothering to glance at Mrs. Longbottom, Harry grabbed Neville's arm and urged him forward.

"Meet me in the Tearoom on the fifth floor," she stated as they set off.

"Yes, Gran," Neville called as she stepped onto the elevator.

"Formidable woman, your Gran," Healer Smethwyk commented.

Neville nodded as they stopped at a hall junction with slower traffic.

"Well, this is the ground floor, obviously, and here we treat artifact accidents. Things from broom accidents to wands backfiring and everything in between. We treat over three dozen a day a least, though most are not very serious."

They began going down the halls, looking in on a few patients being healed or examined. Everything seemed to be well in hand, so Harry wasn't surprised when Smethwyk didn't ask if he wanted to heal anyone.

Taking the stairs, they went to the first floor: Creature-Induced Injuries.

"This is my floor. I am head of this area, the Dai Llewellyn Ward. Some serious cases come here, and often times it is a matter of life and death," he said grimly.

Harry and Neville stayed close, hearing a few moans from some of the rooms. Suddenly, they heard a commotion from down the hall.

"Healer Smethwyk! Healer Smethwyk!" a nurse cried, hurrying from one of the rooms far down the hall. "Code Lilac!"

With a curse, Healer Smethwyk suddenly stopped and whirled around to face Harry and Neville after glancing at the sign on the door they were right next to. "I need to handle this," he stated, before pushing the door open and sticking his head in. "Mr. and Mrs. Hovel, I know this is an odd and sudden request, but could I have you watch these two boys for me for a moment? I'll provide free treatment for your son today."

"O-of course, Healer," came the reply.

Smethwyk turned back to Harry and Neville. "Stay in this room until I return. I shouldn't be too long."

"Yes, sir," Harry answered, hearing the urgency in the older man's voice.

With that, Harry and Neville were gently but hurriedly pushed into the room. The door shut behind them.

"Uh, hello," a man by the bed said as he stood up.

There was a young boy lying in the bed with a book on his lap. There was a massive bandage around his arm. On the other side of the bed was a woman in a rocking chair, cradling an infant.

"Hello," Harry said, taking a few steps in.

"I am Mr. Jake Hovel. This is my wife, Mary, our son, Andy, and daughter, Ann," the man said, walking to them and holding out his hand. Harry took it.

"I'm Harry Potter, and this is my best friend, Neville Longbottom. Uh, sorry about intruding like this," he said awkwardly.

"Mr. Potter?" Mrs. Hovel questioned as Mr. Hovel shook Neville's hand. "The child healer?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose you could say that," Harry managed uncomfortably.

Mr. Hovel cleared his throat. "Forgive us. I've been out of the wizarding world for some time, and she's a muggle, so we're a bit behind the times here. The only reason we're here now is because of what's happened to Andy."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked as Andy blinked up at him and stared, wide-eyed.

Mr. Hovel sighed tiredly. "He was bitten by some rabid beast. Actually, the only reason we're here instead of in a muggle hospital is because he performed accidental magic. He banished the creature away, along with the garbage he had been taking out at the time."

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"I hadn't seen it, but I definitely heard his scream and the loud boom he had caused with the banishment he performed."

"Was the bite bad?" Harry asked, following Mr. Hovel closer to the bed. Neville was close behind him.

Coming to the foot of the bed, Mrs. Hovel still rocking little Ann, Coral's coils tightened around his wrist.

:Harry:

She didn't need to say anything more. The moment she had squeezed his wrist, he sent out his magic to sense the area around him for what had unsettled her.

Harry's eyes focused on the boy.

He felt . . . a lot like Professor Lupin, but . . . softer, weaker.

Harry swallowed, glancing down at the boy's wound. If he could get close enough to diagnose him, maybe he would get a clue about why the boy felt dangerous. And maybe then he would have a clue with Lupin.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hovel . . ." Harry began, glancing to the mother. "Would you mind if I . . . well, tried to heal his wound? I could also make sure the creature's bite didn't leave anything behind."

"Oh, would you?" she asked, so relieved. "I know it has been causing him terrible

pain. It comes in waves."

The boy shifted up, suddenly looking hopeful as he put his book aside. He appeared to be around eight years old.

"A Healer told me about you," he said softly. "He told me you saved a boy's life at the magic school. Is that true?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. It's true."

"Wow. So you can really fix my arm?"

"Yeah, I should be able to," Harry said, moving around to the bed's side as Mr. Hovel motioned him over.

"So, what do you need us to do?" Mr. Hovel asked, quite open to allowing Harry to heal his son. He had read that Harry Potter was a miracle worker and was able to wield the powerful healing abilities of parselmagic.

"Nothing, but if you're skittish around snakes, let me know now," Harry said, trying not to show he was a bit surprised by their willingness to let him use parselmagic on their son.

"Snakes are awesome!" Andy cried, before cringing because he had shifted his arm.

"Well, as long as the snake won't bite . . ." Mrs. Hovel managed uneasily behind Harry.

"Oh, she won't. She's very gentle," Harry assured as he lifted his sleeve a little to reveal Coral's head.

"Wicked," Andy breathed, staring at Coral as she slithered further down Harry's arm and to his scarred hand. Andy and his family noticed the scar but didn't say anything about it.

"Alright, um, whenever you're ready," Mr. Hovel said, curious and intrigued.

Harry nodded. "Okay, first, I'm going to do a quick scan and diagnose any other problems there may be. Madam Pomfrey says it's always good to be sure," Harry said, now right up against the bed.

"Okay," Andy said as his father sat down on the other side of the bed and comfortingly took his good hand.

Harry slowly moved his left hand with Coral around it to place it on Andy's shoulder. It almost looked as if Coral was giving the boy a little kiss on his neck.

Andy giggled. "That tickles."

Harry smiled, before concentrating on his task. :What's wrong?:

Instantly, he was shown the boy's arm, terribly torn and mangled. The flesh had been ripped and pulled to such a degree that it was a miracle the boy even had a hope of keeping anything below the elbow. Harry bit back a wave of nausea as it quickly shifted, focusing on something else. There was a dark residue of magic saturating the wound, and the darkness was already coursing through the boy's veins. Focusing, Harry allowed his magic to analyze it, to get a feel for what it was. It was aggressive and wild, but not particularly evil, just ruthless. Dangerously ruthless.

A pulse suddenly boomed in Harry's ears, as if the darkness was a living thing. Harry's vision flashed with an explosion of gray, the sound in his ears morphing into a loud long howl, much deeper and stronger than any wolf's.

:Werewolf: Coral hissed.

And Harry, suddenly, understood. That was why this boy and Lupin felt so dangerous. They were werewolves.

:What should we do? What *can* we do?: Harry asked Coral, ignoring the Hovel's muffled gasps at hearing him speak parseltongue.

:It hasn't overtaken the child yet. We may be able to defeat it:

:Defeat it? How?:

:Well, it's a curse, so. . .:

:We could do what the book says to do to handle curses. Dissolve it: Harry answered.

:Yes, though we don't know where the left over magic will go or what it will do. Of course, it will no longer be a curse, but the magic will still be there: Coral warned. :Magic cannot be created nor destroyed:

:Well, we can't just leave the boy like this: Harry stated.

:I agree:

"Mr. Potter?" Mr. Hovel asked uncertainly. "Is something wrong?"

Harry swallowed, looking up into the man's blue eyes. "Do you know what bit him?"

Mr. Hovel became very still. "The healers don't know yet, we're still waiting for the results. They should have them soon though."

Harry closed his eyes, recalling the small bits about werewolves he had read. They were feared in society, hated and despised. It was not a pleasant life. A werewolf could not marry, could not own property, and was rarely able to even obtain a job.

And now this boy had that to look forward to — that is, if Harry didn't stop it.

"I know what bit him, but I believe I can handle it and cure him. If you let me try," Harry stated.

"What? What's wrong with my boy? What bit him?" Mrs. Hovel cried, while trying to keep her voice level so she wouldn't scare her baby daughter.

"It was a werewolf, wasn't it?" Andy whispered.

Harry turned his face to him and met his eyes. "Yes."

Well, whatever composure the mother had had went out the window, and the baby soon followed her mother's wails.

"*Silencio*!" Mr. Hovel bellowed, silencing his wife and his daughter with a sorrowful but earnest look as he reached across the bed and gripped Harry's right arm firmly. "Do it, Mr. Potter. Do whatever you think you can do to help my son. Do it now."

Harry's heart was in his throat as he stared into the desperate eyes of the fearful father.

Had his father looked that distraught when Voldemort came into their home? Had he been this forceful in his words to his mum? Had he gripped her arm this hard when he told her to get to his room?

Harry swallowed thickly as he looked to Neville who was now as white as a sheet.

"Tell me if anyone is coming, Neville, and don't let them pass," he stated boldly, not sure what would happen during his attempt and still clueless as to what the magic from the curse would do if or when it was dissolved. "Mrs. Hovel, take your daughter over there and stay back. Mr. Hovel—"

"No one will interrupt you, Mr. Potter," he stated, already by the door with Neville. "I will stand here."

Harry nodded, before turning his back to them all.

:I think I should heal the wound first: Harry told Coral.

:Yes:

"Alright, Andy, I'm going to need to remove your bandage so I can heal your arm before I can take care of the other problem. I'm going to go ahead and numb you now," Harry said, deciding it was best to say what he was doing before he did it.

"Okay," Andy said with a gulp.

"You can close your eyes if you wish," Harry suggested, though the boy's eyes remained fixated on Coral and Harry's hands.

:Nerves, sleep: he whispered, brushing his left hand over the boy's entire bandaged arm.

The boy gasped in surprise, before he relaxed, clearly more comfortable than he was before.

Slowly, Harry began undoing the cloth, unwrapping it bit by bit.

"This isn't a pretty wound," Harry stated, now not only speaking to Andy directly, but all in the room. "You can close your eyes or look away anytime."

He removed the rest of the cloth. It was coated in ointments and blood and smelled of a bitter waxy material. Putting it aside, the wound was completely exposed. It looked just as Harry had been shown. It looked like a wild animal had taken hold and just shook its head as hard as it could back and forth, worsening the injury.

"He got me pretty good, huh?" Andy whispered.

"He did," Harry said, carefully holding the boy's arm level with his right hand as he brought his left with Coral above the wound. "Alright, ready?" he asked, looking at the boy.

"Ready," Andy said.

:Rips and tears, mend; wound, heal: Harry stated, weaving his magic around Andy's and using both to fuel the healing.

They watched the muscle reattach to itself and the tissues surrounding it shift back as the swelling disappeared throughout the wound. The gnarled skin smoothed out and stretched over the newly healed flesh, until it finally met the healing skin on the other side. And there, faintly, left over from the horrendous wound, was a long, barely visible scar. It stretched from the boy's wrist to his elbow, curving unevenly across the top of his forearm.

Harry frowned.

:It's a curse scar, Harry; this is the best we can do: Coral stated as Harry canceled the numbing.

"It's a curse scar. I forgot you can't remove them," Harry said with a soft smile, briefly touching his forehead where his own curse scar was.

"It's alright, this is an awesome scar," Andy said, slightly pleased. "No one at school will be able to top it!"

Harry smiled, before growing serious, part of him wondering where Healer Smethwyk was. He could be back at any moment, and who knew if they would allow him to do this. He had to get this done, asap.

Harry got on the bed, kneeling beside Andy.

:I think it'll be best if you put your right hand on his chest and your left with me on his forehead, your palm right above his nose:

:The third eye, right: Harry agreed. "Okay Andy, go ahead and lay completely on your back for me."

Andy did so without question as he glanced at his father who gave him an encouraging nod. His mother was currently rocking his little sister, her lips bone white with worry as she pressed them together, tears in her eyes.

Doing as Coral had suggested, Harry positioned himself beside Andy, leaning over him and placing one hand over his heart and the other on his forehead.

"I want you to relax. I want your magic as still and as calm as possible because I am going to manipulate it with mine to destroy the curse. Can you be calm for me?" Harry asked.

Andy nodded stiffly under his left hand as he closed his eyes.

"Don't let anyone near this bed," Harry stated, not wanting any interruptions or distractions.

:Ready, Coral?:

:Ready:

Harry inhaled, gathering his magic at his center as he had practiced a dozen times before in the infirmary under the watch of Pomfrey. He let it churn, slowly letting it seep down towards his hands and he stretched out to take hold of Andy's magic once again.

:Curse, be no more: he stated firmly as he released a pulse of his magic and wove it around Andy's to combat the curse.

Harry's eyes were open, staring at the boy's face, as he made contact with the curse, feeling it beat within the boy's blood. With no hesitation, his magic zeroed in on every strand of the curse, surrounding it with thick power and purpose.

Harry felt Andy stiffen, but he held him, suddenly feeling the curse crumble in their magic. Exhaling, Harry slowly began to pull his magic back after a long moment, no longer sensing any bit of the curse left.

:Stop: Coral stated, and Harry quickly realized why.

The magic that had made up the curse was there, boiling at the boy's center, threatening to spill over and flood the boy's core. Harry quickly did the only thing he could think of and engulfed the mass with his magic.

:Calm . . . calm . . .: Harry whispered over and over, until finally. . . .

It surged.

"Harry!" Neville cried.

His vision flashed white, and he knew he was no longer on the bed. Though, where he was exactly, he had no idea.

The next thing Harry knew was the fact he was flat on his back on the cold hospital room floor.

"Harry, are you alright?" Neville asked, kneeling over him with Mrs. Hovel hovering just behind him looking terribly worried.

:Coral?: Harry gasped.

:I believe you are fine, Harry, though the left over magic from the curse has been absorbed by you and the boy:

:Are you okay?:

:Yes, thank you:

"I'm alright," Harry said finally, sitting up, just as the door to the room was slammed open.

"What is the idea of you locking the door?" Healer Smethwyk asked heatedly, his eyes blazing.

"That was my doing, Healer Smethwyk," Mr. Hovel stated, stepping between him and the rest in the room.

Healer Smethwyk, who was now joined by three other healers, quickly looked around the room, trying to learn anything they could.

"Why?" Smethwyk asked, entering the room as Mr. Hovel stepped back to join his wife and daughter to the left.

"He healed me, look!" Andy exclaimed, standing on his bed and waving his healed arm about proudly, never minding the thin hospital gown he was wearing.

The healers gaped, before rushing forward.

"How is this possible?" one asked, grabbing hold of the boy's arm and pointing at the faint, long ragged scar.

"But *it* had conflicted with our healing spells," another stated.

"This is a miracle!"

"How do you feel?" Smethwyk asked Andy.

"Fine! But I'm hungry. Mom, can I have cake?" he replied.

Harry and Neville moved as far as they could from the confused doctors, coming to a stop beside Mr. Hovel. Harry felt the man place a hand on his shoulder as Andy managed to break through all the chatter and point firmly at Harry.

"I told you! Harry did it!"

With that, everyone went silent and turned to face the one Andy was pointing to.

Harry swallowed.

"Is this true, Mr. Potter?" Healer Smethwyk asked slowly.

"Y-yes, sir," he answered.

Everyone was completely still, staring at him. Coral took that moment to emerge from his sleeve.

A nurse behind Smethwyk gasped, while another put a calming hand on the woman's shoulder.

"It's his familiar. It's what helps him perform parselmagic," the older Healer calmly said. "I read it in the Daily Prophet."

"And what did you do exactly?" Smethwyk asked Harry.

"I healed his arm and got rid of the curse before it could completely take hold of him," Harry stated.

"Curse?"

Harry straightened, not liking the looks some of the Healers were giving him now.

"The creature that bit him," Harry began, only to slowly glance up at Mr. Hovel, whose hand was still on his shoulder.

"Mr. Potter offered to attempt to heal my son's wound. Before doing so, he stated he would be scanning for any other issues. He told us he found a curse, and that it was from the bite, but that he was confident he could remove it if we let him. We let him," Mr. Hovel roughly summarized.

Smethwyk was now staring, noticeably unnerved now, at Harry. With that stare, Harry knew Smethwyk knew. He knew Andy had been bitten by a werewolf.

"Do you believe you got rid of said curse?" Smethwyk questioned breathlessly, choosing not to identify the curse.

"I know I did. The curse has been completely dissolved curse and—" Harry felt Coral tighten her hold of him, causing him to carefully think about what he was saying. He

smoothly cleared his throat. "And I am confident Andy is perfectly fine now."

He had decided to keep the fact he and Andy had absorbed the left over magic to himself. Giving that bit of information wouldn't help anyone.

Mrs. Hovel gave a grateful cry before turning to Harry and giving him a hug, her daughter squirming all the while.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, thank you so much!" she cried, squishing him against her.

After a moment, she was pulled away by Mr. Hovel, to which Harry was thankful. Coral was amused.

Suddenly, Healer Smethwyk was right in front of Harry. "Mr. Potter, I don't know how you managed to heal Andy's arm with that curse, but believe me when I say you have done this family a mighty service. It would have taken several weeks for that to have healed completely, and it would have only been thanks to the full moon, which isn't exactly a blessing to those bearing this curse."

"He's not a werewolf," Harry said firmly. "Not anymore."

Smethwyk and the other healers looked skeptically at him.

"If you don't believe me, test him again, but I'm telling you, he's not a werewolf," Harry reiterated.

"That's not possible," Smethwyk stated.

"It is. I did it."

"Retest him," Mr. Hovel said. "Test my son again."

Smethwyk turned to Andy's dad. "Very well."

O o O o O

Severus entered the Great Hall, part of him actually looking forward to the holidays. It had been a long time since he had really been able to enjoy a Christmas, one without war and the constant fear of death around every corner.

But not all was well. Severus was reminded of this when he had gone to the Headmaster's office a few days before the holiday break started.

Albus told him there was something in the forest attacking the unicorns. So far, one

had even been killed and drained of blood. In not so many words, Dumbledore admitted he believed it was Voldemort. Within that admission, Severus also learned that Dumbledore had confronted something in the forest around the same time when the unicorn had been found by Hagrid.

The battle had been brief, and the being had fled quickly, but not before blasting the clearing Dumbledore had been in to smithereens.

"I am sure whatever I confronted is what's endangering the unicorns, Severus. And let me tell you, if it is what we fear, he has gained strength quickly, and that is worrisome," Dumbledore told him, carefully wrapping his injured hand with a white cloth.

Severus was still amazed the old man had made it out of there with only one injury. Not long after he had been told what had happened, he went and investigated the area. He found the clearing totally charred and blackened, the trees completely disintegrated within the forty foot diameter area. Standing at the edge, Severus had stilled.

He knew who had done this, and it wasn't Voldemort, or, at least, not *only* him.

Peter Pettigrew's preferred spell was a variant of *Bombarda*. A spell whose remnants looked exactly like what he found in the Forbidden Forest.

Peter was in the forest, working with the Dark Lord.

"Alright there, Profess'r Snape?" Hagrid asked him as he approached the head table.

"Yes, Hagrid; good morning," Severus said formally, taking a seat between him and Professor Flitwick.

Hagrid beamed.

There were a few students in the Great Hall, having remained for the holidays, the Weasleys included.

Severus looked down at the near empty Gryffindor table to find the Weasley boys there. Ron had seemed to settle into school life nicely, though he was still bummed out about having lost his rat. The Twins were their usual selves, up to harmless mischief. And Percy remained, well, Percy.

With a muffled sigh, Severus pushed their future deaths from his mind and focused on his breakfast as the morning post was delivered by owls. He took his newspaper

and left it folded by his plate. He would read it later.

"Oh! Mr. Potter, I oughta throttle you!" Pomfrey suddenly roared from the end of the table.

Everyone in the Great Hall turned and stared.

There, fuming with steam practically pouring from her ears, was Madam Pomfrey, seething as she stared at the front page of the Daily Prophet, muttering under her breath as she read.

With a sinking feeling in his gut, Severus quickly grabbed his paper and opened it.

"Oh, merciful Merlin," Flitwick breathed beside him as he looked over at Severus' paper to read the title of the first article.

Severus' grip tightened, taking in the bold words plastered across the entire span of the paper's front page.

HARRY POTTER HEALS BOY OF LYCANTHROPY AT ST. MUNGO'S—HEALERS CONFIRM!

And beneath these words was the picture of the cured boy, Andy, standing tall in his hospital gown and holding his scarred arm out for the camera with his family standing behind him.

Severus could only stare. How was this possible? In the future he had never done this. Granted . . . he had never tried.

"Oh my," Dumbledore stated rather tonelessly, lifting up his own copy as his eyebrows rose.

O o O o O

A/N: Well, there it is. Thanks again for reading and reviewing ^^

In the works, *Festivities and Gifts*.

Festivities and Gifts

Questions Concerning:

Horcruxes: Friendly reminder, there are not any horcruxes in this story. I decided to omit their existence, as I didn't want to include a hunt for them. I've read plenty of hunts and don't care to write another.

How Voldemort has survived without Horcruxes: In canon, it was stated several times that Voldemort had undergone many dangerous and dark magical transformations. I'm going to say one of these rituals is why he hadn't died-which I will go into detail later.

How Snape Entered 4 Privet Drive: The blood wards protect Harry from magical threats. Because Severus' goal was to help Harry, the wards let him in.

Part 12: Festivities and Gifts

The rest of the week before December 23rd went by quickly for Harry and Neville. Sheltered within the Longbottom Mansion, Harry and Neville were free to relax and enjoy their time away from the rest of the world, well, for the most part.

Mrs. Longbottom had not really been pleased with the events that had resulted in them feeling the need to flee from the hospital earlier that week. Although she couldn't help but be impressed with what had occurred, she did not like the attention it had brought. Leaving the hospital had been an affair. Not long after the Healers had come into the room to find Andy healed, the word of the event had spread through the hospital. By the time it had gotten to the fifth floor, where she had been, people were saying Harry Potter was going room by room, healing people of every injury, sickness, and disease imaginable.

This rumor, of course, was incorrect; though, by the time she had gotten down to the first floor where Harry and Neville were, Harry was indeed going around *nearby* rooms to heal 'simple' wounds under the curious eyes of the Healers. It was amazing. Not even Augusta Longbottom could say otherwise.

It was only when patients from other floors began attempting to get to Harry that Mrs. Longbottom decided it was time for them to leave, no arguments. And so, they left by Healer Smethwyk's fireplace in his office.

Mrs. Longbottom didn't broach the subject of what had happened at the hospital to Harry or Neville when they returned to the mansion. As far as she was concerned, it

seemed, the entire event was in the past and should be left there. She didn't want to deal with it, so left it alone.

Both Harry and Neville were grateful for her silence on the matter, though the paper the following morning had been a bit of a shock to them. The public was crazy about Harry Potter now, more than ever before. Every day, there was an article on him, speculating on what the werewolf community would do in light of this, if Mr. Potter would offer to heal other werewolves, and if he would be curing anything else. It was all very surreal. People, according to the Daily Prophet, were sending hundreds of letters to St. Mungos, seeking Harry Potter for healing. And this was only a few days after healing Andy.

Part of Harry was just waiting for people to start showing up at the mansion or hundreds of letters to be delivered anyway, but that, thankfully, didn't happen.

"So Professor Snape is going to pick you up at noon today and take you to Diagon Alley?" Neville asked Harry as they entered the library.

They had been reading everything they could find on nerves and brains, trying to learn more about them and what could be done to repair them. So far, they hadn't found much, but it had only been a few days.

"Yeah. I need to get some formal robes," Harry answered.

Neville nodded. "It's too bad you couldn't fit into mine to borrow. Diagon Alley around Christmas time can be crowded."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I don't really care much for crowds. But Professor Snape will be with me," he said confidently.

Neville grinned. "No one will bother you while he's with you."

"Nope." Harry smiled.

O o O o O

"Albus, I must speak with him," Fudge said, speaking to Dumbledore from the fireplace.

He had fire-called the Headmaster roughly a half hour ago, desperate for guidance.

"I believe Mrs. Longbottom has made it clear that Mr. Potter is not to be disturbed while under her care," Dumbledore stated.

Fudge sighed. "Yes, but you don't understand. Representatives from other countries are coming to St. Mungos to verify the reports. It will only be a matter of time before they begin seeking an audience with the boy himself!"

"Cornelius, we don't know if Andy Hovel's case was unique or not. There are a lot of things to consider here. Yes, Mr. Potter healed young Hovel, but that doesn't mean he can heal anyone infected with Lycanthropy. Perhaps Mr. Potter can only heal those recently bitten."

"Well, then that is why I must speak with Mr. Potter so we can arrange a time to determine the limits of his abilities. I have already received a few letters from other political leaders of other countries, asking me what we've determined exactly. I cannot leave their inquiries unanswered, Albus!"

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "You are going to the Malfoy's Christmas party, are you not?"

Fudge's eyes widened. "Oh, I had forgotten the boy would be attending. . . ."

"There you go then. I am sure no one would be offended if you spoke to him for a few minutes there, and I am sure Mr. Potter would be willing to hear you out."

"Thank you, Albus. I must go prepare for it. I need to show Mr. Potter how much he is needed!"

Dumbledore's face suddenly grew serious. "Cornelius."

Fudge grew still, his flaming face in the fireplace staring at the Headmaster, taken aback at his shifted tone.

"Mr. Potter is only eleven years old. If I suspect even a hint of manipulation, I will not be pleased. Yes, Mr. Potter deserves to know what his healing young Hovel has brought about, but I will not have you turn him into some sort of prize to be danced in front of the other nations. Clear?"

"Yes, Headmaster, I understand," Fudge said with a heavy swallow.

"Good," Dumbledore said, his voice light once again. "Glad we've had this little chat."

Fudge nodded before bidding him good day and cutting off the fire-call.

Dumbledore sighed, before getting up from his knees and moving away from the fireplace.

"I'll be with Mr. Potter when the Minister speaks with him," Severus stated, taking a step out from the corner.

"Yes, which is the only reason I reminded Cornelius of his opportunity at the party."

The potions master nodded.

"I hope Harry will be able to cope with his increased fame. He's no longer just The-Boy-Who-Lived now," Dumbledore said softly.

"I believe Mr. Potter will take it in stride, but I must admit I am not looking forward to taking him to Diagon Alley," Severus said. "However, I agree with the point you made earlier. We cannot hide Mr. Potter from the world. Doing so would just make it worse, adding mystery on top of everything else."

"Yes, we may not like it, but there is not much we can do about it," Dumbledore said.

O o O o O

Severus apparated near the edge of the snow covered property in his formal robes.

Since he and the rest in the hall had all received a nice shock in reading the paper a few mornings before, things had become a bit . . . familiar.

It was much like the days after Halloween in 1981, when the wizarding world had learned Harry Potter had somehow caused the Dark Lord to vanish without a trace. Just like then, people everywhere were talking about the boy, whispering in corners, talking about him over meals, and including him in bedtime stories. Once again, Harry Potter had captured the public's imagination.

Severus only hoped he could get the boy through Diagon Alley without everyone rushing toward him for an autograph or something.

Severus shook his head as he came to the front door of the Longbottom mansion and knocked.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape. Mr. Potter is ready to go with you," Mrs. Longbottom stated, opening the door.

"Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom," Severus said with a short nod of his head. "He will be back here before midnight. If he is not, notify the Headmaster immediately."

"Of course," she answered.

"Come, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said, watching Neville wave goodbye to Harry from the entryway as Harry hurried to his side. "Diagon Alley first. Stay close by my side at all times."

"Yes, sir."

With Harry by his side, he turned and began walking back down the path, away from the mansion and to the rim of the wards. He heard Mrs. Longbottom close the door.

"We will go to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions," Severus said, the coolness in the air making their breath visible.

"Yes, sir."

Severus glanced down at Harry. "Your work at St. Mungo's was noteworthy, although Madam Pomfrey was not exactly pleased with learning about it in the paper."

Harry looked up at him a little worried. "How angry was she?"

"Oh, I believe her exact words were, 'Mr. Potter, I oughta throttle you'."

"Pretty angry then," Harry muttered.

"Mr. Potter, I am not going to say what you had done was wrong, because it wasn't, but it was dangerous. What if you hadn't been able to remove the curse? What if it had spread to you? What if something had gone wrong and that boy had suffered for it?" Professor Snape asked seriously.

Harry sighed. "I couldn't *not* try. Could you? If you could use parselmagic, would you have been able to just do nothing if you knew you *might* be able to help?"

Severus' expression softened. "No. But I want you to remember, not everything will always turn out as well as this has. Things *can* go wrong."

Harry nodded, biting his bottom lip. "I understand, sir."

"I'm not trying to discourage you, Mr. Potter, I just want you to be cautious when you attempt things you've never done before. But I also want you to know I am pleased with your development. I admit you have surpassed my expectations. When I first gave you the Art of Parcel, I never imagined you would be healing a boy with Lycanthropy a few months later."

Harry blushed. "It really isn't a big deal. I just did what I could to help Andy."

"You cured his Lycanthropy, Mr. Potter. It *is* a big deal. I know you may find this very hard to believe, but it has been thought, for centuries, that it was impossible to cure Lycanthropy. In fact, in many books, it is stated as a fact," Severus informed him.

"I don't think people should rule things like that out, especially when the 'impossibility' could help someone."

"That is a nice view to have, but many would say it is unrealistic," Severus said as they made their way through the snow, leaving footprints across the Longbottom property.

"Maybe, but if no one went against people's doubts, we'd never get anywhere, would we? I don't believe anything is impossible — anything worthwhile anyway."

Severus smiled softly, recalling similar words that had been spoken by the future Harry. "You are quite correct, Mr. Potter. Which reminds me, your healing of young Hovel has created a bit of a stir. Do not be surprised if you are approached by a man named Cornelius Fudge."

"The Minister of Magic?" Harry asked, curious.

"Yes."

"You don't care much for him, do you, sir?" Harry asked carefully.

"He isn't a bad man, but he can be rather foolish and cowardly. He also seems quite determined in talking to you. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Longbottom, he would have already."

Harry's eyebrows rose at that.

"Be careful in what you agree to when you speak to him. He is not above using people to get what he wants. He is much like Lucius in regard to that."

"Like Mr. Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Yes, much like Lucius, but he is nowhere near as cunning, thankfully. However, that hasn't stopped him from getting to where he is, so be cautious."

"Okay, I will," Harry said as they came to a stop. "Are we going to apparate?"

"Yes. We are going to apparate to Diagon Alley. Once we have finished there, we will be leaving from the Leaky Cauldron and take the Knight Bus to Malfoy Manor."

"The Knight Bus?"

"I want you to experience all modes of wizarding transportation. I believe it is a necessary knowledge that should be learned as soon as possible," he said as he stepped closer to Harry and offered his arm for apparition. Harry took hold and they vanished with a nearly silent crack.

They appeared at around the same place Mrs. Longbottom had taken him and Neville.

Severus quickly put a hand on Harry's shoulder, keeping him close as he began leading him to Madam Malkin's.

The place was crowded, and Harry supposed correctly it was because everyone was doing last minute shopping. And so, because everyone was sidetracked with getting gifts for their families, they didn't pay any attention to Harry, who was currently being shuffled through them with his head down beside the dark robed professor.

Entering the robe shop, which wasn't extremely crowded, Severus led him toward the back area of the place.

"May I help you, Professor?" Madam Malkin asked, having seen their entrance and quick course to the more secluded area of her shop.

"Yes," Severus said, stepping behind Harry and putting both of his hands on the boy's shoulders. "This young man needs formal robes and shoes. I trust they can be sized and fit for wearing within a few hours?"

"Of course," she said, moving forward and pulling out her measuring tape, glancing at Harry's forehead but remaining professional. "So, colors?"

Nearly an hour and a half later, Harry had a new set of formal robes. Under pitch black dress robes was a dark, forest green vest with golden yellow embroidery going along the borders. The golden yellow embroidery was also added along the rims of his robes, and it looked very sharp. With his emerald green eyes, Harry agreed that he looked very nice, formidable even.

:Harry, could I make a request?: Coral asked as Madam Malkin made some final adjustments to Harry's robes.

:Sure:

:I get cold rather quickly in this weather when I move away from you. Is there a way I

could . . . perhaps . . .:

Harry smiled before glancing around. There was no one within earshot or paying them any mind.

"Um, Madam Malkin, could I make a strange request?"

"Certainly, young sir," she said. Having noticed Professor Snape didn't want people drawn to their location, she didn't use Mr. Potter's name.

"Um, could you make a narrow cloth tube to match these robes? It's for. . . ." Harry lifted his sleeve a bit to reveal Coral's head.

Malkin gave a small smile, already having seen her earlier and quite taken with the friendly serpent. "Of course. It should only take me ten minutes to get it woven. Silk or cotton?"

:Ooo, silk: Coral answered.

"Silk, please."

Malkin nodded and quickly got to work on it once she finished the last hem.

Fifteen minutes later, both Harry and Coral were ready for the party. Harry also got a nice pair of black leather gloves to give to Mr. Malfoy with an embroidered ***M*** at the cuff as a nice but simple party gift. Professor Snape had suggested it, as he knew it was Lucius' favorite sort of gift to receive. The embroidered M was Harry's idea.

"Thank you, Madam," Severus said with a slight bow of his head as Harry paid her.

Harry had his formal robes on, and his old ones were in his pocket, shrunken, while Coral had her little 'sweater' on. It was charmed to adjust to her size over time, and when there was a large temperature drop around her, the sweater would warm up, compensating for the temperature difference. The silk was layered in a special way to allow freedom of movement. It didn't completely cover her, but enough to keep her from becoming chilled when away from Harry. It was winter after all.

"Oh, it was my pleasure," Madam Malkin said, beaming. "And if you need any more of those special garments, just let me know. I'll be happy to make more for the little dear."

Harry smiled with a nod. "Thanks, she really loves it already."

Walking out of the shop, Severus assessed the area. A few people were now craning

their necks at Harry, trying to get a good look at him, as if trying to determine if he was in fact who they likely hoped he was. Severus was actually a bit surprised it had taken people this long to notice the boy. Granted, they had been out of sight for most of that time, Harry having been in the fitting room for half of it.

Harry remained close by his side, clearly having noticed how people had begun to look at him now. Soon, it was clear they knew who he was, but they did not approach him. Instead, they stared, before turning to one another and whispering excitedly.

Severus scanned the crowd around them as they continued their way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Something was off.

He could feel tiny prickles at the back of his neck. A feeling he always got when something was amiss, and then he knew.

Someone was following them.

Leaning toward Harry ever so slightly, not slowing or adjusting their pace, he whispered. "We're being followed. Use that portkey if I tell you to activate it or if spells are exchanged."

Harry nodded.

Finally, they made it to the Leaky Cauldron through the brick wall, but Severus knew they were still being followed.

Entering the pub area, they wove around the tables and headed toward the front to exit. The place was not even half-full, but there were still plenty of people about. Harry kept his head down, trying not to attract any more attention, when it suddenly happened.

"Mr. Potter!"

A man behind them rushed forward, his hand reaching toward Harry. Harry felt himself yanked aside by Severus, the professor lightning fast.

The pursuing man was blasted back, and Harry never even saw Severus use his wand as he was ushered further behind the dark frame of the potions master.

The man landed in a heap beside the bar and everyone froze in the Leaky Cauldron, staring at Severus Snape standing boldly between the heap and Harry Potter. The

heap shifted, revealing a man in worn cloths, littered with scars. He looked ten times worse than Remus Lupin.

"Mr. Potter!" the man cried, now on his hands and knees. "Please, please help me!"

Evidently, he didn't see or care that there was a very protective wizard with a wand pointed at his head right over him.

No one moved as the man continued to beg.

"Please, please help me like you did that boy at St. Mungo's. Please, I can't take this anymore. . . ."

Harry peeked around Severus' intimidating frame and really looked at the pathetic man, sending out a bit of his magic to evaluate the situation.

Harry's eyes widened, and Coral once again tightened around his wrist.

"You're a werewolf," Harry stated quietly.

The man nodded as a great deal of the people in the pub gasped.

"I don't know if I can cure you, sir. The curse hadn't been in Andy for very long, not even three days," Harry said finally, his voice echoing in the shocked pub.

"Please, could you just try?" the man pleaded. "I will do anything."

Harry looked up at Snape, whose wand was still pointing at the man. Severus wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not, but he knew Harry would do what he thought was right, and that meant he would try to heal this man, right then and there if at all possible. With or without the dozen people watching them.

Severus gave an internal sigh as Harry stepped up beside him and put his small hand on his arm.

Harry had done that a hundred times in the future.

When the battle was over.

When the enemy was defeated.

When there was no enemy to kill.

When there was someone to help.

"Go on, Mr. Potter. I will not stop you. But know I will intervene if I believe his intention is anything other than being healed by you," Severus stated.

The man looked up with wide, hope-filled eyes as Harry went forward and came to a stop right in front of him.

"Sit up and lean against the wall," Harry stated, deciding the man did not need to lay down like Andy had. The man did as he was told without question as Harry kneeled beside him and lifted his left sleeve to reveal Coral.

Severus kept his wand trained on the man, but he knew there was no danger. This man really did just want to be healed. There was no ill intent.

O o O

Harry stared at the man for a long moment, looking into his scarred face.

"Professor, could you cast something on him to keep him still? I was able to keep Andy still, but . . ." Harry said.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," Severus stated simply.

"Thanks," Harry whispered, trying to decide how exactly to approach this.

No one in the pub uttered a word as Harry put his right hand on the man's chest and his left on his forehead.

:He has been cursed for a long time, Harry: Coral stated.

:I know:

:This may not work. You can feel how deeply this curse has grounded itself in him. I am not sure we should attempt this:

Harry bit his lip before deciding something. :We must still try:

:Very well:

"Sir, this may not work, but I will try," Harry stated, gathering his magic at his center.

Unable to move, the man simply continued to stare at him with desperate, pleading eyes as everyone else in the pub simply watched.

Harry let his magic go into his hands, as he had done when healing Andy, before

taking hold of the man's magic to help.

Exhaling and releasing a pulse of his magic, he whispered, :Curse, be no more:

Immediately, Harry realized this was not like treating Andy. The curse was deeper, thicker, and stronger. Much stronger. Clenching his jaw, Harry pushed his magic harder, not willing to even think this could fail. He felt his magic weave into the man's blood and gather at his heart where the base of the curse resided.

Harry closed his eyes, concentrating as hard as he could to surround every bit of the curse in the man with magic. He felt the man's muscles stiffen, despite the professor's spell, as he strained to combat the curse.

He heard echoing howls in his ears, distantly at first, but it began to grow louder and louder, until his ears were ringing from it.

This curse would not be defeated as easily as the curse in Andy.

Fear welled up in Harry as the Professor's words surfaced in his mind. *Things **can** go wrong.*

:No, No, this will not fail. This will work!: Harry hissed furiously as a different magic rose from within his chest and rushed down his arms and into the man.

The magic he had obtained from Andy in dissolving the curse.

Harry's eyes snapped open, surprised as he felt the white magic surge forth, reinforcing his assault on the curse, until, finally, the curse was overpowered and dissolved. Instantly, much of the magic left over from the newly destroyed curse quickly joined with the white magic and returned to Harry's center.

"Alright, Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked, his eyes searching Harry's own.

Harry blinked up at him, realizing he was still by the scarred man and had not been propelled back as he had been with Andy.

"I'm alright, sir. It was just a little harder than healing Andy," he said, pulling back his hands and slowly standing up as he turned his eyes down to the man who was still sitting against the wall, unmoving.

"*Finite*," Severus muttered, canceling his previous spell.

The man burst into grateful tears and went to Harry on his knees. "Thank you, Mr. Potter, thank you! I will forever be in your debt," he said, taking Harry's right hand

and clasping it with both of his.

Harry noticed the man's eyes were different. His pupils seemed to blend in with the colored portion of his eyes. It was quite a characteristic.

"Is-is he really cured?" Tom, the pub owner, asked.

"Yes, he is cured," Harry said confidently, not feeling a trace of the curse in the man. "Though, I'm afraid your eyes are a result of you being cured after being a werewolf for so long," he added, looking back at the man.

"Oh, I don't care. Even if the cure had blinded me, I would still be just as grateful to you as I am now!" the man exclaimed, bowing his head and touching his brow to the back of Harry's hand.

"You are no longer a carrier or sufferer of the curse. You are no longer a werewolf," Harry said.

The man gave another grateful sob. "I won't forget this, Mr. Potter. I am forever at your disposal. My name is Walter McCaffrey. Just say the word and I will be where and when you need me. I swear. Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome, sir," Harry said, not knowing what else to say.

"Mr. Potter," Severus stated, stepping beside him. Harry got the message. They needed to get going.

Harry nodded, before looking around them, finding everyone in the pub staring at him, amazed and astonished.

Severus didn't wait for them to gather their nerve to approach and quickly steered Harry to the door. Harry didn't object.

"Uh, M-merry Christmas, Mr. Potter!" Tom shouted as Harry and Snape made a quick exit.

O o O o O

They continued walking down the streets of London for a few minutes in silence.

Severus knew Harry was getting nervous. No doubt, he was wondering if his professor was upset with him or something. Truthfully, Severus was a bit unnerved with what he had just witnessed.

In the future, he had seen Harry heal many people with parselmagic, but he had never seen anything like what he had just witnessed. Harry's green eyes had turned white, glowing brightly with power.

"How difficult was it?" he asked, breaking the silence as they went past a few muggle shops.

Harry jumped at his sudden question before hesitantly looking up at him. "Hard, sir. For a moment there . . . I didn't know if I would be able to do it, but then the magic from last time—"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "The magic from last time?" he questioned.

Harry swallowed and Severus heard a quiet hiss from his sleeve. Obviously, Coral was giving him some advice. Hopefully, good advice.

Harry sighed. "When I had healed Andy, some of the magic left over from the destroyed curse went into me."

"And the rest of it?"

"Went into Andy."

Severus frowned. "Did you inform anyone of this?"

Harry looked down, knowing he was about to receive a reprimand as they stopped at the side of an empty street. "No."

The potions master bit back a growl. "Mr. Potter, did it ever occur to you that this might be some information the Healers might want to know when examining Andy, or that this might be detrimental to your own magical health and development?"

Harry continued looking down at the snowy sidewalk. Severus felt frustration boil within him.

"Damn it, Harry, look at me!"

Startled, Harry raised his face, his eyes wide.

Severus wanted to smack himself. He had not meant to slip and call Harry by his first name, but there were more important things to be upset about at the moment.

"Do you understand how dangerous that was? I cannot believe you were so foolish! How long have you known about the magic you got from the curse?"

"I felt it go into me soon after I healed him. I knew it wasn't bad. It felt good and clean. Pure."

"That is beside the point! Why did you not tell anyone?"

"I knew it wouldn't really help anyone. The Healers were already going nuts with what I had done. I didn't want them to think the curse was still there in Andy or that it had spread to me or something. I just wanted things to calm down," Harry rattled off quickly, fighting down the lump in his throat.

He hadn't wanted to disappoint the professor, but evidently he had.

"Please, professor, I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal."

Severus briefly closed his eyes and calmed himself, knowing upsetting the boy would get them nowhere. He reopened them and looked at him, reminding himself that Harry was still a first year, no matter how advanced his magical abilities were.

"Your eyes glowed white when you healed Mr. McCaffrey, Potter. Am I right to assume the magic you gained from the curse is white?"

Harry blinked before nodding.

"Did you get more of this white magic from healing Mr. McCaffrey?"

"Yes, though some of it remained with him, like it had with Andy."

Severus nodded, trying to build an understanding of what this magic was doing exactly.

"It helped me, sir. When I was beginning to struggle with the curse, it rushed in and took care of the curse really fast," Harry said, hoping the Professor wasn't as mad at him as he had initially feared. "It was like the curse's kryptonite."

Severus paused, processing Harry's words.

"We are going to need to watch this, Mr. Potter. This is very new territory here. I have never heard of this sort of thing before."

Harry nodded mutely, looking up at him with apologetic and slightly tearful eyes. Obviously, the thought that he had disappointed his professor was hitting him quite hard.

Severus knew he needed to smooth things over, while at the same time ensure

Harry understood why he had not been pleased with him keeping the knowledge of the white magic to himself. Granted, he was sure Harry had gathered why during his short rant.

"Mr. Potter, do you understand why I was upset with you?" he asked slowly, keeping his voice level.

Harry swallowed and nodded stiffly.

"Why?" Severus asked, wanting to hear it.

"I-I had kept something secret that could be important for others to know."

Severus nodded, slightly pleased he had not needed to aggressively entice the answer from him and that Harry was able to keep himself together in answering. He didn't want a crying first year.

"I understand at the time it seemed best to keep that information to yourself, but you could have owled the hospital later so they could have checked Andy over more carefully after they were confident the curse was gone. I'm also sure Andy would like to know this white magic had entered him, and his parents certainly have the right to know."

"I'll owl them tomorrow," Harry said softly.

Severus nodded. "However, I think, all things considered, you did right by not telling them about some of it going into yourself. *But*, you still should have informed someone about it. And by someone, I mean an adult."

Harry raised an eyebrow before he could stop himself.

Severus sighed. "I could curse the Dursleys," he whispered venomously before refocusing. "You could have owled me or Madam Pomfrey."

Harry looked down.

"Look at me, Mr. Potter," he stated gently. Harry did so. "Learn from this; that is all I ask. Remember there are adults who want and need to be told about things concerning you, whether or not you feel it is important."

Harry gave a tiny nod, but it was enough for the Professor.

Severus put a strong but gentle hand on Harry's shoulder. "Well, I am sure the Daily Prophet has already been notified of your deed. Let us get to Malfoy Manor before

any reporters manage to catch up with us."

O o O o O

"It was amazing! He just touched the man, whispered something, and then there was a flash of white light!"

"His eyes glowed white when he had done it."

"Oh, I can't believe I was there! You could feel the magic rise in the air when he did it!"

All throughout Diagon Alley and in the Leaky Cauldron people were talking excitedly. It only took a few minutes for reporters to begin showing up, inciting the people to recount the event all over again.

Tom's business boomed that day. Everyone wanted to see where the healing had taken place and kneel where Harry Potter had.

O o O o O

Harry and Severus got off of the Knight Bus and stepped onto the road near the heart of Wiltshire.

The ride had been what Severus had expected, which was unfortunate. Severus had to keep Harry level most of the trip, but he accomplished what he wanted. The boy now knew about all the traditional wizarding ways to travel and how to use them. It was a small detail, but it could prove important to Harry in case of an emergency.

"So this is where the Malfoys live?" Harry asked, walking closely beside the professor.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. It has been in their family for many centuries," Severus said, glad Harry had bounced back so quickly after their discussion. Going up the long path that led to the front door, Severus put his hand on Harry's back. "Remember, your words hold weight."

"I remember, sir," Harry said.

"Always stay within my sight," Severus stated.

"I will, sir," Harry promised as they came to the front door.

With that, Severus knocked on the ornate door.

It opened a moment later, a well-dressed woman holding it open for them.

She was in a very fine, layered, green dress. She had bright red lipstick and liberal eye shadow with blond hair and brown highlights. Harry instantly compared her to a character in one of his aunt's favorite soap operas. She looked very . . . rich.

"Good afternoon, Severus," she said, bowing her head in formal greeting to the professor before turning her eyes down to Harry.

Harry gave her a small smile, deciding it would be polite, before he moved to hold out his right hand to introduce himself; however, he didn't get that far.

"Mr. Potter," she breathed, taking a step forward and putting her soft hand on his cheek.

Harry stood there, frozen.

She removed her hand after a moment, looking slightly embarrassed, which was a curious sight.

"Forgive me, Mr. Potter. I have been quite eager for your arrival and couldn't help myself just then. I am Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother," she said, her eyes brimming brightly as she continued to look at him.

Harry's eyebrows lifted in understanding. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Malfoy," he said.

She smiled and stepped aside. "Please, come in."

Harry and Severus entered, following her through the entryway, up the stone stairs on the right and into the formal dining room. The dining room had a very long narrow table directly next to a large fireplace. On the other side of the table, away from the fireplace, was an open area for dancing or other socializing. There were already snacks all along the table and roughly two dozen people mingling in the decorated room. There was a Christmas tree in the corner with many hovering ornaments floating around it.

Harry and Severus entered and came to a stop.

Harry spotted Draco, speaking to his father and another man he didn't know. He had a top hat and was wearing the most horrendous green suit Harry had ever seen. He also spotted Gregory Goyle, Vincent Crabbe, Theodore Nott, Pansy Parkinson, and Daphne Greengrass snacking on cookies and crackers beside their parents near the table.

"Lucius, our honored guest has arrived," Narcissa announced, cutting through the conversations going on in the room.

"Ah!" Lucius said, turning purposely toward his wife's voice. "Excellent!"

Harry remained where and as he was. Standing straight beside Severus. Coral tightened her coils around his wrist comfortingly as Mr. Malfoy approached them. Draco followed beside his father, smiling broadly at Harry as everyone turned to watch.

"Mr. Potter! Lucius Malfoy. We meet at last," he said, coming before Harry and taking hold of his hand to shake.

Harry returned the grip and shook, giving him a nod in greeting before Lucius released his hand and welcomed Professor Snape. Harry took this moment to retrieve his gift for the host and when Mr. Malfoy turned his focus back to him, he held the gift out for Lucius to take. "I was told a gift for the host was appropriate for events such as this," Harry said. "I hope you like it."

Lucius took it and found a pair of black leather gloves with cuffs bearing a bold cursive ***M***. He gave a small smile, honestly quite taken with the practical gift.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, and though I will happily receive this gift, I trust you know it is I who should be bestowing gifts to you for what you have done for my family," he said, his voice smooth. Dangerously smooth, Harry thought.

Harry glanced at Draco, finding his friend suddenly looking rather serious. He reminded himself of the Professor's letter and advice.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy," Harry answered, deciding to keep it simple.

Lucius smiled, though Harry got the feeling it was rather forced. "Please, Mr. Potter, take whatever you wish from the table to eat. Narcissa spared nothing in preparing everything for today," he urged, leading them to the long snack covered table. "Now, let me introduce you to my other guests."

Harry politely took a small stack of crackers to tide him over before dinner as he turned his attention to the closest group of guests.

"I am sure you have met young Mr. Vincent Crabbe at Hogwarts," Lucius began. Receiving a nod from Harry, he continued. "These are his parents, Markov and Deborah Crabbe."

Everyone else in the room was still and quiet, watching the exchange occurring before them.

Harry was then taken around and introduced to the other guests, including the Goyles, Parkinsons, Notts, Flints, Greengrasses, and a few Board of Governors with their wives.

Harry tried to ignore their awestruck stares as Mr. Malfoy introduced the guest family heads and they in turn introduced their families. Greg Goyle was as dull as always. Theodore Nott was impressed with Harry, but remained as stoic as his father. Marcus Flint was stiff but shook Harry's hand with vigor. Pansy Parkinson gave a floppy, bashful wave. Daphne Greengrass and her younger sister, Astoria, gave small curtsies, though Daphne was less frazzled with meeting Harry. The governors and their wives were curious about him, but courteous.

Soon after, Harry was directed away to the man he had first seen speaking with Mr. Malfoy when he had entered the room.

"Mr. Potter, this is Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic," Mr. Malfoy introduced. "Minister, Harry Potter."

Fudge eagerly took Harry's hand. "So glad to finally meet you, Harry. May I call you Harry?"

"Sure," Harry said with a shrug as Fudge glanced at Professor Snape beside Harry.

"Professor Snape," Fudge greeted.

"Minister," Snape returned with a nod.

Fudge refocused on Harry, instantly ignoring the professor's presence. "Harry, may I have a word?" he asked, motioning them away from the rest of the guests.

"Sure. What about, sir?" Harry asked, following the Minister to a quieter area of the room.

Professor Snape followed, but not closely. He was close enough to hear and, if need be, intervene.

"I've recently met with the Hovels," Fudge began. "They are really grateful to you."

Harry thought fast, wondering if humility here was best or not. "I was happy to heal their son," he answered simply.

Fudge smiled. "I'm sure you were," he said, patting Harry's shoulder and pausing.

"You wanted to talk about something, Minister?" Harry asked when Fudge had yet to continue.

"Yes, yes, there was, Harry. After what you've done for little Andy, I was wondering if you'd be willing to try to help others. You see, there are people coming to me asking for you, and . . . well, I can't simply leave their requests unanswered — I'm the Minister, after all."

"What do you want me to do exactly?" Harry asked, recalling the professor's warning about the Minister.

"Well, I'd like to schedule a time for us to determine the limit of your ability to heal Lycanthropy. For example, can you heal adult werewolves? Can you heal those who had been bitten a long time ago, or can you only cure the recently bitten?"

"I cured an adult about an hour ago," Harry answered easily. "He'd been a werewolf for a long time and has the scars to prove it."

Fudge startled. "An adult? A few hours ago? Where?"

"At the Leaky Cauldron."

"Did anyone see you?" Fudge asked, stunned.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Everyone who had been in the Leaky Cauldron at the time."

"And he's truly cured?" Fudge asked.

"Yeah," Harry answered, watching Fudge's eyes grow very large.

"Please excuse me, Mr. Potter. I must return to the Ministry."

"Alright, sir. It was nice to meet you."

Fudge bid a quick farewell to Lucius before bolting out the fireplace.

"You told him about Mr. McCaffrey, I see," Professor Snape said, amused as he came to Harry's side.

"Yes, sir, but why did he need to leave so suddenly?" Harry asked.

"He needs to verify what you said, and once he does that, I imagine he will need to

prepare for the press."

"Oh."

"Don't concern yourself over it," Snape said, leading them back to the party. "It's done. Nothing anyone can do about it now."

Harry sighed. "This is going to be bigger than healing Andy, huh?"

"Without a doubt, but it will eventually settle and, hopefully, you will be able to help more people," the Professor whispered.

Harry gave a soft smile.

"Hey, Potter," Draco said, coming to his side.

"Hi, Draco," Harry said, relieved there was at least one person (besides Professor Snape) who acted normal around him.

"Dinner is about ready to be served. Father wants you to sit next to him on his right," he said. "I'll be on his left."

"Alright."

"Daphne Greengrass will be next to you. Is that acceptable?"

Harry nodded, wondering why he was being asked about seating arrangements.

Five minutes later, the table cleared itself and Mr. Malfoy beckoned everyone to sit for dinner as he pulled the chair out at the head of the table for Harry to sit.

O o O o O

"His name is Walter McCaffrey, Minister," the Healer told him outside of the room at St. Mungos. "And we have him on record as being a werewolf."

"Have you done the test yet? Is he still a werewolf?" Fudge asked.

"We've done the test and have just gotten the results back. And no, he's not a werewolf . . . not anymore."

"I want to speak with him."

"Of course, Minister."

O o O o O

Everyone took their places, standing behind their chairs. He table had been cleared of snacks, and now it was only covered with a formal, deep green tablecloth.

Mr. Malfoy was at the head of the table with Harry at his right and Draco at his left. Pansy Parkinson was beside Draco and Professor Snape was beside her. Next to Harry was Daphne Greengrass, and beside her was Mr. Greengrass. Narcissa was at the other end of the table with Mrs. Greengrass to her right and Mrs. Nott to her left.

Lucius Malfoy called his glass from the table into his hand and then tapped it lightly with his wand, causing it to ring magnificently.

"Before we sit and dine, I would like to thank you all for coming this evening. I trust you all have been enjoying yourselves thus far," Lucius said with a cunning smile, before turning his attention to Harry beside him. "I would also like to once again formally thank Mr. Potter for what he has done for my family. Thank you for coming Mr. Potter. It is an honor to have you here."

Harry inclined his head respectfully. "I am happy to be here, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius raised his glass in salute to him before motioning them all to sit. Once they were all settled, the food and drinks appeared and Mr. Malfoy took the first bite, allowing dinner to begin.

"What got you interested in healing, Mr. Potter?" Mr. Greengrass asked as everyone began digging in.

"In school, I always liked the idea of becoming a doctor, a muggle healer, so when Professor Snape gave me a book about parselmagic and told me it's the most powerful healing and protective magic there is . . . it just stemmed from there," Harry answered.

"What are your future plans?" Lucius asked.

"Continuing Hogwarts, of course, and improving my parselmagic."

"How are you liking Hogwarts so far?" a Board of Governor asked.

Harry couldn't remember his whole name, but his last was Perkins.

"I like it a lot. It's become, well, more than a second home to me," Harry said

honestly.

"You've grown up at your relatives' home, with your mother's sister, correct?" Lucius asked, before taking a bite of his food.

"Yes, sir. The Dursleys."

"Muggles?" he asked, though he wasn't quite asking, and his voice held a slight sneer.

"Yes, sir. They don't like magic much, to be honest. They tried to prevent me from attending Hogwarts, but Hagrid got me anyway," Harry said with a smile.

"They don't like magic?" Draco asked, stunned. "You would think, being muggles, they would be amazed with magic and impressed."

Harry shook his head, unable to see Professor Snape cringing internally, wishing the conversation would change directions. "You would think."

"Foolish muggles," Lucius practically snarled before graciously changing the subject of the conversation. "So how is Hufflepuff treating you, Mr. Potter? I admit that was not the House I had been expecting for the Boy-Who-Lived."

"You're not the only one, but I think the sorting hat got it right. Professor Sprout is great," Harry answered, before finishing his salad.

Light conversations cropped up as the meal continued, finished dishes and plates vanishing before new ones appeared, loaded with the next portion of the dinner. Harry answered the occasional question, but he was a bit surprised no one asked him about Andy or his healing of werewolves. Perhaps it wasn't proper etiquette to discuss such things?

Finally, they reached dessert.

"Mr. Potter," Mr. Nott said, beginning his slice of pie. "I am curious, how long have you been practicing parselmagic?"

"Well, I healed Neville on the train to Hogwarts and he was the first I ever healed."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "So you had only started using parselmagic a few weeks before the accident?"

It was obvious that the accident he was referring to was the one that had nearly cost Draco his life.

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"Unbelievable," Marcus Flint whispered. "And you use a snake to do this?"

"Yes, Coral helps me."

"Go on, Potter, show them Coral," Draco insisted suddenly. "I know mum has been wanting to see Coral ever since she left the infirmary that day."

Lucius and the others straightened in their seats and a few shifted forward a bit as Harry pulled up his sleeve, revealing Coral wrapped around his scarred wrist and hand.

"She's marvelous," Perkins said, sparing a glance at Harry's scar but deciding not to comment on it.

Coral lifted herself proudly.

"She is a magical coral snake, I see," Lucius said approvingly. "A magnificent creature."

"She's brilliant." Harry placed a finger gently on her head. "If you want to pet her, you may," Harry offered them.

"Ew, no, tha—," Pansy began, only to be cut off by Daphne.

"I will," Daphne said, reaching her hand toward Coral.

Coral happily offered her head and was gently stroked.

:I like this one, and her last name. Greengrass. Perfect: Coral hissed.

Harry smiled.

"Did she say something, Potter?" Draco asked, a bit more in tune to when parseltongue was being spoken than most other people because he was a friend of Harry's.

"Yeah, she likes the name 'Greengrass.' She recognizes that it is a good, strong name," Harry answered.

Daphne and her sister blushed. Mr. Greengrass straightened, pleased, while Mrs. Greengrass gave a soft, approving smile.

Soon after that, Mrs. Malfoy stood up and raised her glass, quickly getting their attention.

"I would like to take this time to give a toast," she began, before raising her glass to Harry. "Mr. Potter, may magic and fortune always smile upon you, and may your life be long and fulfilling. To Harry Potter."

"To Harry Potter," everyone but Harry repeated, lifting their own glasses and taking a sip with Mrs. Malfoy.

Narcissa smiled, lowering her glass but remaining on her feet.

"Mr. Potter, my husband and I would like to now give you a gift as thanks for saving our son's life," she said, giving Lucius a meaningful glance.

Lucius rose to his feet.

"Dobby," he called.

-Pop-

Harry gave a slight jump at the sudden noise and appearance of the odd creature now beside him and Mr. Malfoy. Harry blinked, trying to figure out what he was looking at exactly. The creature was in a raggedy old pillow sheet, and he had huge ears and a large pointy nose.

"Dobby is here, master. What can Dobby do for master?" Dobby asked with a deep, low bow.

"Mr. Potter, please, stand here," Lucius said, pointing a foot from the corner of the table beside Dobby.

Harry did as he was told, getting a very subtle nod from Professor Snape.

"I, Lucius Malfoy, in gratitude, do hereby give complete ownership of Dobby, the house elf, to Mr. Harry James Potter. Mr. Potter, do you accept this transference of house elf ownership and gift of appreciation?"

Harry blinked, glancing down at the house elf gazing up at him with unbelievably huge eyes before looking back up at Mr. Malfoy. "I do. Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. This is a generous gift."

Suddenly, Coral gasped. :Harry, did you feel that? There was a shift of magic:

Lucius gave Harry a short nod before motioning Harry to return to his seat.

Dobby remained fixed where he stood, still staring at Harry with wide eyes. Harry looked over at him from his seat. Harry held out his hand for Dobby to take.

"Master?" Dobby asked uncertainly as he took Harry's right hand.

"Nice to meet you, Dobby," Harry said kindly.

"You may order him to do whatever you wish. You are his master; he is bound to you now," Lucius provided flatly. "You may have him wait for you outside if you wish."

Harry got the distinct feeling Mr. Malfoy no longer wanted Dobby in his house.

"Um, go ahead and wait for me at the Longbottom mansion, Dobby, if it's no trouble," Harry said.

"Of course, Master, it is no trouble. Dobby will wait for master there," Dobby said quickly, before leaving with a pop.

"You'll like having Dobby, Potter," Draco said. "He's pretty entertaining at times."

Harry smiled, though he was internally reeling. Had he just been given a slave?

O o O o O

Severus breathed a sigh of relief when the dinner party finally came to an end.

"Thank you for the pleasant time, Narcissa," he said.

"Oh, it was our pleasure, Severus," she said.

He and Harry were standing at the entryway with the Malfoys. Most of the other guests had taken their leave a few minutes before through the fireplace.

"Mr. Potter, thank you for coming," Mrs. Malfoy said sincerely. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"I did, Mrs. Malfoy, thank you," Harry said. "And Coral did too. She liked the attention."

Narcissa smiled, glancing at Harry's covered wrist, though she spotted Coral's tongue flicker out from under the robe's sleeve.

"Mr. Potter," Lucius said, stepping forward and holding out his hand.

"Thank you for inviting me, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said, taking Lucius' offered hand.

"It was my pleasure, Mr. Potter."

O o O o O

A/N: Well, there it is, the biggest part so far. I admit this part was very hard to write, but it's done, or at least I'm calling it done :P Thanks again for reading and reviewing ^^

Next part is under construction.

National Treasure

Questions Concerning:

The Malfoy's Gift: Just to make this clear - the gift of Dobby did NOT remove the debt their family owes to Harry. Draco still owes the life debt. Giving Harry Dobby was just a gesture of gratitude, which is expected to be shown by respectable pureblood families.

Part 13: National Treasure

"What did you think of your first formal dinner party?" Severus asked as they walked toward the Longbottom mansion.

It was about 11:30 pm, and the night was cold. Snow was beginning to fall.

"It was . . . interesting," Harry said, thinking back to Dobby.

Severus smirked. "Yes, it was that."

"Sir, is Dobby a . . . slave?" Harry hesitantly asked, slowing in his steps.

The professor held back a sigh. He knew he would need to approach this carefully. Dobby and Harry had many similarities.

"Dobby is a house elf, and yes, he was a slave to the Malfoys." Severus stopped and faced Harry. "You must understand, Mr. Potter, in the Wizarding World, house elves are servants of old magical families. They are bound to them, and much of their magic comes from being tied to the head of house. Many house elves thrive when given work, and fall into despair when they are prevented from serving. They really do love work; they find purpose in it. Remember, purpose is important to any sentient being. Without it, they become lost and fall into depression or turn to things they ought not to. Many dark wizards are merely individuals trying to find a reason for their existence and cannot fathom that a life of kind service would be more fulfilling than a life of conquest."

Harry swallowed. "Is that Voldemort's problem?"

Severus' jaw clenched as Harry used the present tense — 'is'. The boy understood.

"I don't know. He had been a Hogwarts student a long time ago. His name had been Tom Marvolo Riddle. He had been Head Boy and received full marks in nearly every subject. Even the Headmaster admits Voldemort may have been the most brilliant

student Hogwarts has ever seen."

Harry's eyebrows rose.

"Unfortunately, it seems that some of the most gifted individuals have the hardest time discovering a worthwhile purpose. Perhaps it is because they have never truly struggled, as so many things come easy to them, thus they rarely experience the feeling of accomplishment — making their search of purpose all the more difficult. But I am getting sidetracked — back to the issue at hand. Do you have any questions about house elves in particular?"

"Well, how smart are they? I know they can talk, but, I mean . . . are they like intelligent dogs or something?"

Severus smirked. The only reason why he didn't chuckle was because it was a reasonable question, especially for someone raised in the muggle world. "No, they are just as smart as most any person, and they have feelings as well. Which reminds me — clothing. If a master gives their house elf clothing, it frees the house elf from service. Now, understand that most house elves believe this to be the worst thing a master could do to them. To most of their kind, it is the most horrendous thing a house elf can experience in their life."

"So, serving their master is an honor to them?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

Harry glanced at the Longbottom mansion. "But I don't want a slave."

"Who says he must be your slave? I have a house elf, and she is more of a helpful companion to me than anything else. And I believe the Longbottoms have a few elves. Yes, Dobby has become bound to you, but that benefits him as much as you. Do you understand?"

"I . . . think so, Professor."

"Good," he said, before reaching in his pocket and pulling out a little shrunken package. Unshrinking it, he handed it to Harry. "It's from the Hovels. It was sent yesterday and, because Mrs. Longbottom doesn't want to be rushed by owls, was forwarded to Hogwarts with the rest of your mail."

"The rest of my mail?"

"You have been sent a little over a dozen letters. Don't worry, none of them are

urgent and will wait for you when you return to school. Most of them are no doubt fans merely wishing to receive an autograph. You don't even really need to reply — might be best if you just leave them be."

"But isn't that rude?"

Severus gave a tilted nod. "Perhaps, but ever since you were an infant you received letters. Thankfully, a few trusted individuals took care of them, placing the letters in a special storage folder and removing any valuables and placing them into your family vault."

"People have sent me things?" Harry asked, his eyes growing wide.

"Money mostly. Thankfully, wizards are practical in that regard. The few items you received are in your family vault — magical items intended for adult wizards."

"Like what?"

"Well, if I recall correctly, someone sent you magical armor. It's too big for you right now, but when are about ready to graduate, it will certainly fit you then."

"Wow," Harry said as they made it to the front door.

O o O o O

Dumbledore sighed, relieved the day was finally over, but not looking forward to the rest of the week.

Cornelius had called for an emergency meeting soon after discovering Harry had, in fact, cured an adult werewolf. The Wizengamot meeting went over two hours, and the time had been spent discussing Mr. Potter. Debates ensued on whether or not Mr. Potter should be asked to heal others and how to organize things if he were to do so. However, all talks were soon cut short and the meeting dismissed when word arrived that several leaders of nearby countries were inquiring to speak to the leaders of the Ministry about news they received surrounding one Walter McCaffrey.

This eventually led to Dumbledore calling an International Confederation of Wizards meeting to order an hour later.

Being the Supreme Mugwump, it had fallen to him to bring order to the chaos that quickly resulted from Fudge announcing what Mr. Potter had succeeded in doing.

Many were astonished, and then quickly began shooting questions, asking things

like if Mr. Potter would be willing to sell his services, while others were disbelieving, asking if this 'miracle' had been verified by anyone outside of the Ministry.

It had all been rather stressful, but finally, after a long and arduous process, those present came to a decision, a course of action everyone agreed upon, at least to some extent.

Soon, likely after Christmas, but still during the break, the Minister, on behalf of the Wizarding World — not merely just the Ministry — would ask Mr. Potter to attend an international meeting. Even though St. Mungos and a Healer outside of the Ministry had verified the success of the cure, many still had doubts and wanted Mr. Potter to heal a werewolf from their country as proof. After much debate, it was decided that fourteen nations would each bring a werewolf from their country to act as a 'cure verification'.

Dumbledore thought it was a fair compromise, at least compared to some of their other suggestions; however, he still didn't like the idea of exposing Harry to more publicity and having him use a magical art that was very much unknown. But it was out of his hands. Sure, he was head of the ICW, one who kept order and made sure every opinion was heard and discussed, but he didn't have a vote, unless a tie occurred.

Fawkes gave a quiet, encouraging trill.

"Thank you, my old friend, but I really do wish I could make things different. Harry should be a carefree boy. I did not want him to be thrust into all of this, under the scrutiny of nations." Albus shook his head. "But I suppose, he really is unique and amazing. Nothing anyone could do would change that. I only wish he could be himself without causing most everyone around him to stare at him in wonder or denial."

Fawkes gave another soft trill, almost in agreement.

The Headmaster looked at the clock. Severus should be returning soon. Hopefully the party at the Malfoys had gone smoother than his day.

Finally, almost dozing behind his desk, the fireplace flared and his potions master stepped out.

"Headmaster."

"Ah, Severus, the party was uneventful I hope?" he asked, motioning the younger man to sit. They had much to discuss.

"It went better than I had anticipated, although Mr. Potter may find it difficult to completely accept the Malfoys' gift, although it has already become official."

Dumbledore's eyebrow went up in question. "It was an elaborate gift, I take it?"

Severus smirked. "Not sure 'elaborate' would be the best description. No, Mr. Potter is now the owner of Dobby, the house elf."

The Headmaster's eyes widened. "That is . . . unexpected."

"Quite."

O o O o O

Harry entered his bedroom. Professor Snape had already left, although he had informed Mrs. Longbottom of Dobby after assuring her there had been no issues at the dinner party. She took him by his word before sending Harry to bed.

Neville was already asleep, which was no surprise as Mrs. Longbottom had stated she had made him keep the usual bedtime, not allowing him to stay up for Harry's return. It was just as well. It was late and Harry just wanted to go to sleep. He would open the Hovel package in the morning.

He closed the door, hesitantly turning to face the room. It appeared empty.

"Dobby?" Harry whispered.

-Pop-

Harry jumped, much to the amusement of Coral as Dobby appeared right beside him.

"Master calls Dobby?"

"Er, yeah. I, uh, just wanted to say goodnight and make sure there wasn't anything you needed. Do you need a bed? Where will you be sleeping?"

Harry received no answer, but Dobby's eyes widened exponentially as if he had just heard proof of something completely impossible, like unicorns being seen prancing on mars.

"Dobby?"

The house elf's eyes began filling with tears, and Harry quickly knew he would not

like what was coming. Dobby burst into tears.

"Dobby, shush, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you or anything," Harry said quickly, not sure if patting the little guy on the shoulder would make the situation better or worse.

Dobby managed to calm himself, sniffling and wiping his nose on the grubby pillow sheet he was wearing. Harry managed to hide his disgust at Dobby's clothing. The thing the elf was wearing was worse than Dudley's hand-me-downs! Harry decided he would need to do something about that in the near future.

"Offend Dobby? Master asked if Dobby needed anything. . . . Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, and your goodness, but never did Dobby think Master would be so generous. Dobby never knew. . . ."

Harry was as bright as a tomato. "Generous? All I asked was if you needed anything. Any decent wizard would have done that. And whatever you've heard about my greatness has been exaggerated."

"Master is even humble and modest," Dobby said reverently, his eyes shining with even more admiration. "Master doesn't speak of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named nor of his curing of werewolves."

Harry shifted his feet uncomfortably. "Well, it is getting late, Dobby," he said after a moment.

"Of course, Master," Dobby said, hurrying to the bed and happily fluffing Harry's pillow for him.

Harry blinked. "Uh, thanks, Dobby."

Dobby's eyes widened once more, and for a moment Harry was afraid he would start bawling again.

"No problem, Master," Dobby finally said, stifling back tears once more. "Is there anything else Dobby can do for Master? Retrieve a glass of water?"

"No, thank you, Dobby."

Dobby nodded, his ears flapping about. "Sleep well, Master."

-Pop-

:He is a strange one: Coral stated.

:Yeah, well, he's been living with the Malfoys, and even though Draco and Mrs. Malfoy aren't bad, Mr. Malfoy is:

:Point taken:

:Let's get some sleep: Harry said, finally tucking into bed.

O o O o O

Remus put the morning paper down slowly.

Was this actually happening?

Harry, his best friend's son, could cure Lycanthropy. He had even been able to cure Walter McCaffery, who had been a werewolf for over ninety percent of his life. Remus knew Walter personally. He was a reclusive man, similar to himself, and was absolutely horrified he may one day bite someone, just as his father had him.

Walter had been bitten when he had been a toddler, just old enough to walk and talk. One night, his father had broken free from his confinement, and had bitten him before his mother could step in and stop him. Unfortunately, the story is even sadder than that, for Walter had also lost his mother that night. In protecting him, she was killed by her husband — the man she loved and had sworn to stick by no matter what, even after he had been infected with Lycanthropy. Walter's father had been heartbroken and committed suicide even before the Ministry could begin an investigation. Walter's life went downhill from there, jumping from institution to another, before he reached his majority.

Remus shook his head. Even he had had a better childhood than Walter. At least he had been allowed to attend Hogwarts, thanks to Albus Dumbledore. Walter, on the other hand, had been a known werewolf years before he was eleven, and he hadn't had anyone to speak for him to Dumbledore — as he didn't have the nerve or confidence to seek the popular Headmaster on his own.

Remus was truly happy for Walter. If anyone deserved being healed, it had been that man.

"I doubt Mr. Potter would deny healing you if you asked, Lupin."

Remus jumped, forgetting he was in the Great Hall and not alone. He turned toward Severus, who had spoken.

"I suspect he already knows anyway," the Potions Master continued simply.

Remus blinked and swallowed thickly, his thoughts going back to the many times Harry had stiffened in his presence. Had he known then? Had he sensed the wolf and discovered the truth?

What must he think of me? Remus wondered. *Teaching at a school with such a condition. . . .*

His feelings must have shown on his face, for Severus looked straight at him, a strange sincere understanding rising in his eyes, vastly altering his normally barren expression.

"Do you think he has his mother's eyes for nothing? He sees as she did," he said very quietly, before standing and leaving the Great Hall without another word.

Remus stared after him, speechless, not seeing the Headmaster's contemplative expression beside him.

O o O o O

Christmas day came, and it was the best holiday Harry had ever experienced, despite Mrs. Longbottom's stern presence; however, in a way her being there made it that much more real. She didn't loom over them exactly, but she was there. And, in a way, Harry wondered if she was trying to tone down her normal persona. He didn't know what to think about that.

Dobby remained his dutiful servant, eager to please and terrified of making even the tiniest mistake.

He had opened the package from the Hovels the day before. It was a thank-you letter from Mr. and Mrs. Hovel with a drawn picture by Andy, as well as a little wolf stuffed animal. Harry happily placed the wolf by his bed — the first stuffed animal he could ever remember receiving from anyone.

He had sent a short letter in reply, thanking them for the package and telling them of the white magic he had neglected to tell them about earlier. He hoped they wouldn't be too upset over that. Well, it was too late now.

Harry didn't get many gifts, not that he had expected a mountain, but they were all perfect. He received one from Hagrid, one from Professor Sprout, another from Professor Snape, and the last from Neville.

Hagrid gave him a flute, Professor Sprout had given him a chocolate frog, Professor Snape (with a note telling him to keep the knowledge of the gift to himself) gave him a set of very nice tools for potion making and a few rare ingredients, and Neville gave him a little plant. It reminded Harry of a tiny tomato plant Aunt Petunia had had him plant in her garden several years back — before they promptly died when Dudley ran over them with his bike.

Neville had also received a chocolate frog from Professor Sprout. He supposed she gave one to all her Hufflepuffs.

Harry gave Neville some candy that he knew he liked, though Neville was surprised Harry would give him another gift, stating he had already given him the wand holster. Harry waved him off.

With gifts exchanged, the day continued happily, though Harry had made up his mind about something.

After dinner, and when it was for bed, Harry closed his door and called Dobby.

Dobby had been present for the unwrapping of gifts, but had vanished soon after that, and the only reason he was present when he had been was because Harry had asked him to.

"Master has called Dobby?" Dobby asked.

Harry looked at him for a moment, trying to decide how to begin the conversation.

"Dobby, you work for me now, and I've been thinking. . . ." Harry paused, Dobby's large wide eyes staring up at him. "The only good thing my uncle has ever taught me was the fact that the workers represent those they work for when they are seen by others. How people see them reflect back to their bosses and the overall company. For you it is the same to me. You reflect on me and the Potter family."

"Is-is Master displeased with Dobby?" Dobby asked, horrified.

"No, no, not at all. In fact, you have made me proud to have you as my house elf, which is why I want to change something." Harry stepped forward and pinched the cloth at Dobby's shoulder, lifting it slightly while holding back a rather Snape-ish sneer. "Can you honestly tell me you like wearing this?"

Dobby's eyes widened once again.

"Well, Dobby? Do you like wearing this?" Harry questioned.

"N-no, Master. Dobby doesn't like it much at all," he finally said, shaking his head and making his ears wag.

"Then, why don't we get you something different to wear? Something proper for a good worker of the Potter Family?" Harry wasn't about to use 'slave', 'servant', or anything else. He was also avoiding the word 'clothing'.

"Master means . . . like a uniform?" Dobby asked, his eyes tearing up.

"Well, unless you would rather not," Harry said, wondering if he should have written to Professor Snape before doing this. Was this another taboo of sorts?

"No-no, Master, Dobby would *love* a uniform!" he exclaimed earnestly.

Harry smiled. "Alright, then I think I know exactly who to write to have it made for you."

He turned around and began writing a letter to Madam Malkin.

"Well, black, red, and gold seem like strong colors," Harry said, jotting down that request while glancing at Coral, who was dozing. "Hmm, does my family have a crest?" Harry muttered to himself.

"Oh, yes, Master's family has a crest," Dobby quickly answered.

"Then I'll ask for her to put it on the sleeve and over your heart. She should know what my crest is, right?"

"Yes, Master, it is well known."

"Hmm, I suppose she'll need to know your dimensions."

"Dobby can go to her to have it done, sir. I can pop into her shop. Dobby had done it for former family in delivering robe orders."

"Alright. That sounds good; you can take this letter to her later this week and hopefully she can start on it then," Harry said, finishing his letter before placing it in an envelope with five galleons. Harry figured that would be enough. If not, he had stated in the letter to let him know if he owed her any more.

"Master is so good to Dobby," Dobby said after a moment, slightly choked up.

"I have decided I am only as good as I serve," Harry replied.

O o O o O

There were fifty-seven registered werewolves in England, though it was assumed there was at least seventy total.

Severus supposed Harry, if he was allowed, could cure all of them easily in a month's time. Though, whether or not Madam Pomfrey would let him was another matter entirely. Severus had no doubt Harry was capable, but also knew he was only eleven, and his magic still had a great deal of developing to go through. It would not be wise to endanger it, but it would just be as irresponsible to prevent what could be healthy growth and expansion.

So, it was no surprise when the headmaster asked him to attend a meeting in his office concerning exactly that. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout had also been asked to come.

"Is everything alright, Headmaster?" Madam Pomfrey asked, Professor Sprout looking equally concerned.

It suddenly became apparent to Severus that they had no idea what the Ministry was going to soon be asking of Harry.

"Oh, yes, quite alright. I just wished to discuss a few matters concerning a student."

"Is this about Mr. Potter?" Sprout asked.

"And his curing Lycanthropy?" Pomfrey added.

"Yes. Sometime today, our Minister is going to contact Harry and ask him to attend an ICW meeting that will convene later this week."

Pomfrey and Sprout's eyes widened.

"Whatever for?" Pomfrey asked.

"For a 'cure verification.' Fourteen countries have been selected to bring an individual infected with Lycanthropy to serve as proof. Understandably, there are some doubts about Harry's method and treatment success."

"Fourteen?" Pomfrey asked.

"Why wouldn't they just be happy with one?" Sprout questioned.

"They don't trust one another enough to do so. If there was only one 'trial' people

would question if the person had even been infected to begin with," Dumbledore answered.

"Oh, poppycock," Pomfrey stated.

"Originally, it was over twenty-five. Thankfully, a few nations were willing to trust the others to actually bring real cases of Lycanthropy so they wouldn't need to bring their own."

"Oh, yes, thankfully," Pomfrey exclaimed sarcastically.

"Poppy, perhaps this will be for the best. Think of what this could mean for others . . . like Remus," Sprout said gently.

"We don't even know how Harry does it. It could be draining his life for all we know," Pomfrey continued.

"It is not," Albus stated, deciding to step in and prevent Pomfrey from getting too agitated.

"Oh, and just how do you know? I don't believe you have gone to the Longbottom's to check on him," Pomfrey said. "The Ministry should not be presenting Mr. Potter like some sort of National Treasure to be used on the world stage!"

"Severus told me what he had learned from Harry when he had taken him to the Malfoy's Christmas party," Dumbledore answered simply.

"What did you learn, Severus?" Pomfrey asked curiously.

"He gains a pure white magic from the dissolved curse. I am not sure of the nature of it, but he stated it helped him cure Mr. McCaffrey," Severus answered.

"'Helped him'?" Pomfrey asked.

"I believe it acts as an antidote or a vaccine of sorts against the curse. Often times, such things come from the very ailment they are curing."

Pomfrey paused, thinking it over. "Then perhaps there may be a way to obtain this 'white magic' and use it to cure other werewolves."

"Perhaps," Severus agreed.

"Well, I suppose there is nothing for us to do concerning the meeting," Pomfrey said, calming down. "What did you want to discuss with us exactly, I assume it was more

than the meeting?"

"I understand Harry is going to continue working in the Infirmary on the weekends and that you, Pomona, are going to begin giving him private lessons on control?" Albus asked.

"Yes," Pomfrey answered, while Sprout nodded proudly.

"I want to be kept appraised of his progress. He has already surpassed my expectations for his first year and I am certain he will continue to advance leaps and bounds as far as he is able. I want to make sure he remains able — physically, emotionally, and magically."

"Alright, Albus, but what do you intend to do later? I know this is a bit early to be thinking about, but in a few years, at the very least, he will need to expand from what Pomona and I can teach him," Pomfrey stated.

"I will be advancing his potion lessons at some point. Perhaps a term before he takes his OWLs, depending on his aptitude for it as time goes on," Severus put in. "I am already confident enough to say he would be able to brew a second year potion from the text with very little guidance from me if I allowed him."

"I mean concerning his mage abilities. At some point, especially after how far he has already come, his abilities are going to begin surfacing. I don't know much about slumbering mages, but surly there are signs that appear before they awaken?" Pomfrey asked.

"Yes, there are," Dumbledore said. "And honestly he has already begun showing them, but they are subtle. If I didn't know he was a slumbering mage, I would have missed them."

"'Them', Headmaster?" Severus asked.

This was news to him. Harry was already showing signs? Sure, he was showing great aptitude in magic, but so did a few other students his age, such as Granger and Longbottom.

"I am not sure if it is due to the potion regimen Severus had put him on or even his familiar, Coral, but he has a hold on magic that can actually be felt. Before winter break began, I called him into my office and had him heal a small injury I had suffered in the Forbidden Forest. I wanted to personally see how his parselmagic was coming along," he explained before Pomfrey could pounce on the fact he had not come to her. "His control is extraordinary, and the way he used my magic to heal

my hand . . . he controlled my magic as if it was his own.

"I understand that parselmagic does tend to use the patient's magic in the treatment, but for there to be such precision . . . it's a mark of a blossoming mage."

"Hmm, you're right, Albus. He does wield the magic of others remarkably well, even those who are distressed, which is even more impressive, now that I think about it," Pomfrey agreed.

"He was also able to pull in his accidental magic," Sprout reminded them.

"That's another sign. Even I, with over a century of experience and practice of controlling my magic, have a difficult time reining in my magic when I am especially angered," Dumbledore admitted, preventing himself from glancing at Severus who had seen the last outburst.

"Has he shown any other signs?" Sprout asked.

"Not to my knowledge," he answered. "But he is sure to show others as time goes on. One sign involves magical creatures responding to him in a peculiar way. They will often be more accepting of him, while others will be much more aggressive."

Severus' thoughts strayed to Buckbeak, Thestrals, and Dementors. It certainly made sense.

"Another indication is the ability to cast very powerful spells despite not having a fully or even nearly developed core."

Once again, the potions master was reminded of Harry's third year, when he had cast the Patronus Charm. And Harry had succeeded in doing that despite his weakened condition due to the Dursleys. What would he be capable of now?

"The other is the resistance against certain types of magic. His magic will naturally combat against spells wishing him harm or attempting to overpower him."

Severus's eyes widened at that, while Pomfrey and Sprout blinked.

His ability to fight off the Imperius Curse in the future. How had they missed that? No normal or even gifted fourth year student should have been able to fight off the Imperius. And yet they had just passed it off as yet another of Potter's oddities without much thought.

"Could that have been how . . . with the killing curse?" Sprout asked.

"I am not sure," Dumbledore admitted thoughtfully. "But it is possible."

"We will watch for the signs, but Headmaster, when should we tell Mr. Potter about this?" Pomfrey asked.

"This is really why I needed to discuss this with you all, as I am uncertain. Part of me believes it may be best not to tell him — to allow him to develop without knowing, at least until he begins asking questions. However, another part of me wants him to be informed, to know at least some of what is in store for him magically, but then I begin wondering how best to approach him with it," Albus said.

"I believe we should tell him this summer, before next year," Severus stated.

"Yes, I agree with Severus. Mr. Potter should be told, and waiting for the summer is reasonable. He already has enough on his plate as it is right now. Waiting for the summer would be for the best, I think," Spout said.

Pomfrey nodded as well. "Mr. Potter already knows he isn't like others his age. I think telling him why that is would be better for him in the long run."

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "We will tell him this summer."

O o O o O

"Mr. Potter, something the matter?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

Harry stopped, realizing he was poking at his food. "Sorry, Mrs. Longbottom. I've just gotten a letter today — from the Minister." He added the last bit as she began to raise an eyebrow at him.

Evidently, she didn't like that he had received any mail since she had specifically requested his mail be redirected to Hogwarts, save messages from Professor Snape or the Headmaster.

"I see. What did it concern, if you don't mind me asking?" she asked frankly.

"The Minister wants me to go to some ICW meeting because of the whole . . . well, you know."

Neville looked apologetically at Harry. Harry had told him before dinner while they had been researching nerves.

"And have you replied?" she asked after a moment when he hadn't continued.

"Well, it's not like I can really say no. I replied and said I would come, but I'm not sure how I'll be going. I did send a letter to Professor Snape about it though."

She nodded, as if that settled the issue. "Inform me as soon as you learn details."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, not know what else to say.

He went back to eating, forcing his mind to think about other things. He and Neville's research was at a standstill, to be honest. The fact was, wizards didn't really know much about the brain and the nervous system. Sure, they had spells that could influence the mind and all of that, but they didn't seem to really understand the human brain actually worked. Harry had ordered healer textbooks soon after promising Neville they would do research, but it had turned out disappointing. It honestly reminded Harry of the dark ages, in how little the Wizarding World understood. It seemed muggles knew more about the human body and the impact the brain had on it than wizards. Muggles also had methods of really looking inside the brain, using MRIs and CAT scans. He had heard about them when his uncle had been channel surfing. Yes, wizards could do scans, the spells telling them some of what was going on, but they were not given an image allowing them to really understand the problem. This issue also prevented wizards from using other methods of treatment, like surgery.

And that was another thing. It was clear the Wizarding World wasn't too keen on operating on someone. They viewed it as barbaric, rather than necessary and worth the risk as it often was in the muggle world. They didn't understand that sometimes one had to go in and physically remove something, not merely magic it away. After all, how could one magic away something safely if they didn't fully know what surrounded it?

Harry wondered what they would be shown if they gave Neville's parents CT scans. Well, once summer arrived, he knew what he would be doing — visiting the muggle library and reading up on the human brain, and, perhaps, looking up possible doctors who could give him a clue into how he could possibly help the Longbottoms.

O o O o O

Harry woke to the sound of an owl pecking at his window.

:Harry, another bird has something for you: Coral said sleepily.

Yesterday, he had received a reply from Professor Snape, stating the Headmaster would be contacting him concerning traveling arrangements.

Harry got up, opened the window, and took the letter before the bird promptly flew away.

Opening it, he found large loopy handwriting.

Dear Harry,

I will be coming to the Longbottom Mansion at 8 am tomorrow to take you to the Ministry for the ICW meeting. Please have your things packed by that time, as you will not be returning to the Longbottoms this holiday but will instead return to Hogwarts with me once the meeting ends.

I trust you have been enjoying the holidays thus far. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore

:So we'll be going to the school a few days before break ends?: Coral asks.

:Looks like it:

With that, he began packing, only to pause as he remembered Dobby liked being asked to help.

"Dobby?" Harry called.

-Pop-

"Yes, Master?" Dobby asked, now sporting a handsome uniform.

He was wearing black robes with red embroidery and golden edgings. On his right sleeve was the crest of the Potter House in matching colors and a slightly larger one was over his heart.

Harry wasn't sure, but it seemed as if the uniform had made Dobby more confident and less . . . unbalanced. Perhaps it was because he was getting used to Harry, or maybe it had something to do with what Professor Snape had said about purpose. Either way, the change was pleasant.

"Could you help me pack? I'll be leaving tomorrow morning with the Headmaster, and I want to be ready."

"Of course, master," Dobby said happily, snapping his fingers and causing his things to zoom into the open suitcase.

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Dobby."

"Dobby is happy to help great master Harry Potter, sir," Dobby said proudly, his black, golden brimmed hat balancing somehow between his ears.

O o O o O

"I think he's here, Harry," Neville said, placing Hedwig's cage on his suitcase by the door as Harry turned to Mrs. Longbottom after giving him a nod in agreement.

"Thanks for letting me stay here, Mrs. Longbottom. I've had a great time, it's been fantastic," Harry said honestly.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I am glad you have enjoyed your stay. Perhaps something can be arranged this summer? It would certainly prevent Neville from spending all his time in the Greenhouses," she said.

Harry smiled, while Neville looked quite hopeful at the prospect of his best friend returning during the summer.

"I'd like that very much," Harry said.

With that, Dumbledore reached the front door and knocked.

"Good morning, Augusta," Dumbledore greeted as Mrs. Longbottom opened the door.

"Good morning, Albus. Mr. Potter is ready to go," she said.

"Very good," Dumbledore said, entering the mansion and glancing at Harry's things by the door. "This everything, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and shrunk everything down and summoned it into his hand before placing it into his pocket. Hedwig had gone ahead to Hogwarts along with Dobby.

"Bye, Neville, see you at Hogwarts," Harry said, moving beside the Headmaster.

"See yuh, Harry," Neville said. "I'll keep reading."

Harry nodded, knowing he was referring to their research, as he followed Dumbledore out the door.

"We will be taking a portkey, Harry. You've used one before, I believe?" the old wizard asked as they began making their way to the edge of the wards.

"Yes, sir, with the Longbottoms."

Dumbledore nodded, pulling something from his breast pocket. "This is a powerful portkey, specifically made to take the user or users anywhere in the world. Today, it will take us to Vaduz, Liechtenstein, the agreed to meeting place for the ICW this year."

"It changes every year, sir?" Harry asked curiously, looking at the cloth in Dumbledore's hand.

A sock?

"Oh, yes, Harry. It aids in international cooperation. Granted, there are those who would argue with me about that."

"Where was it last year?"

"In Paraguay, which is in South America. I do hope to visit there again soon."

"It must be cool to go to a different place every year. Me, I haven't ever really gone anywhere, besides Hogwarts of course. The Dursleys didn't take me with them on trips and had me stay with Mrs. Figg across the street. She has a lot of cats, and they're scary smart. I swear they can understand English better than Dudley — granted, that's not really saying much, but still."

Dumbledore hid a frown, wondering about what other things they denied Harry.

"But I suppose I was better off staying with Mrs. Figg," Harry said. The Headmaster wasn't quite sure if Harry was even talking to him anymore. "At least I didn't need to worry about Dudley blaming me for anything, and Mrs. Figg let me help her make cookies once. They didn't really taste that good, but I think it was because she held back on the sugar."

"How often did you stay with Mrs. Figg?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh, not a whole lot, just when the Dursleys wanted to go out to the city and do stuff. You know, last summer, because Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, they had to take me to the zoo. I spoke to a boa constrictor there and some stuff happened, and I . . . well, I already told Professor Snape this . . . I somehow made the glass disappear and the snake escaped. It told me its family was from South America. I wonder if it

found a way back there. . . ."

"Had you ever spoken to a snake before?"

"No. I saw a few in the backyard when I was doing some weeding, but I hadn't known I could speak to them at the time," he answered as they came to a stop and Dumbledore held out the sock for him to take hold of.

"This is going to be a little rougher than a normal portkey landing, so come closer to me," the Headmaster advised. Harry did so. "Alright. One-two-three. . . ."

Harry felt his center yank to the right and he couldn't help but smash against Dumbledore's side as they landed.

"Easy there, Harry. Take a few slow deep breaths, now," he said, preventing Harry from stumbling over and collapsing.

Harry nodded woozily. Portkeys sucked, he decided.

"Do they . . . do they ever get better?" Harry managed in between breaths.

:Goodness, I hope so: Coral wheezed. :That was bloody awful:

"Slightly, though really one just gains a stronger stomach and better balance."

"Good to know," Harry said with a heavy swallow, praying he wouldn't empty his stomach right there.

Finally, after a few more breaths, Harry straightened, recovered.

"Thanks," Harry said, embarrassed, realizing he had relied upon Dumbledore's right arm all that time he was trying not to throw up.

"You've handled the travel quite well. Most people fare much worse after their first long-distance portkey."

"How did you do?" Harry asked before he could think to stop himself.

"Me? Well, my stomach wasn't very happy with me at all. Didn't feel stable enough to eat for the rest of the day," he answered simply before turning his focus to the area around them.

Harry followed his lead, taking in the room they had landed in.

"Well, Harry, welcome to the present headquarters of the ICW in Vaduz, Liechtenstein," Dumbledore welcomed.

Evidently, they had landed in a room specifically made for portkey arrivals. It reminded Harry of Mrs. Longbottom's entryway. It had a rather crisp feeling — very pristine and museum-like.

"Stay close to me at all times. It will not take long for people to recognize you on our way to the meeting chamber."

"What should I expect, sir?" Harry asked, suddenly wanting to kick himself.

He should have been asking questions like that on their way from the Longbottoms, not talking about Mrs. Figg and her crazy cats.

"The ICW is a bit more direct than the Ministry in the way they do things. It helps in some ways, enabling them to get things done faster at times, but sometimes being direct comes across too aggressive and upsets people on certain issues. Do not be alarmed when people raise their voices today, because they likely will. If someone directs a question at you, be diplomatic, but remember, they invited you here and you didn't have to come. Don't answer questions you don't feel you should or ones you don't feel comfortable answering. If there is trouble, I will handle it."

Harry raised his eyebrows at that, hearing the Headmaster lower his tone at the end. He was obviously quite serious in handling whatever trouble that might arise.

"So, am I just going to be introduced and then I'll heal those they've brought?" Harry asked, part of him wondering when they were supposed to head to the meeting but deciding Dumbledore knew when they should be there.

"Yes, though some nations will likely insist on asking you some questions concerning your method."

"Okay," Harry said, not seeing any problem with that. He had nothing to hide.

"Alright. Ready?" Dumbledore asked after a moment.

"Yes, sir."

O o O o O

A/N: Well, this part is sort of the ground work of parts to come, so I hope it's not too dry. I know it has a lot of information, but it's all important to know for later.

Next part, *Curse, Be No More*, is under construction.

Curse, Be No More

Questions Concerning:

Potter's Family Crest: It has a dragon on one half of it and a phoenix on the other. At the center is a Holly Tree. It's very simple, but strong.

Story Length: I highly doubt I will go beyond third or fourth year, but whenever I do finish, there will be an ending everyone should be able to live with.

Part 14: Curse, Be No More

Albus guided Harry through the crowds in the ICW building. It was much like the Ministry in that regard — so many people, rushing to one meeting or another.

People quickly got out of his way, recognizing him as the Supreme Mugwump, but soon their attention shifted.

"That's Harry Potter!" many began whispering excitedly, others pointing and staring.

Harry tried to ignore it the best he could, but Dumbledore knew it was difficult. Finally, they made it to a less crowded hall, but eyes and mutters followed them.

"Ah, Albus! Here at last, I see," a voice boomed from behind them.

Dumbledore stopped and turned, recognizing the voice as Aage Brown's. He was a large black gentleman and a representative of Ethiopia, as well as respected Healer.

Harry turned with him, blinking up at the rather massive human being practically barreling toward the Headmaster.

Albus didn't seem alarmed and offered his hand as the man approached.

"Yes, Aage," Dumbledore said as the man clasped his hand and pulled him into a half hug.

"So how has the Ministry been treating you, old man?" he asked, his deep rich voice booming around them.

"As kind as always," Dumbledore answered before looking down to Harry. "Harry, this is Aage Brown. He's one of the representatives from Ethiopia and is one of the Healers who have been selected to monitor you and those you heal today. Aage, this is Harry Potter."

"So, you're the little man that has caused the recent pandemonium here. Very pleased to meet you," Aage said with a smile, before looking back to Dumbledore. "Well, they are waiting for you and the lad. They've been itching for the meeting to begin."

"I can imagine."

With that, they made it to the meeting chamber and approached the side door at the front area where those presiding over the meeting sat. There were two guards on either side, standing at attention. They gave the Supreme Mugwump short nods.

The place was huge and filled with chairs, many of which already had a witch or wizard upon them.

"You will remain at the front with me, Harry," Dumbledore said, stopping at the threshold before those within the chamber could see them. "If at any time you need to stop, because you are getting tired or for any reason, just tell me so. Don't do anything you don't want to or feel you shouldn't, alright, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "I understand, sir, though I doubt Coral here would let me do anything stupid anyway."

:You got that right: Coral stated, giving his wrist a squeeze.

Dumbledore smiled, before giving a nod to Aage, who then announced them to the members.

Everyone stood, turning to the front. Harry blinked, taking the huge place in. There were over a hundred nations represented there in the room. There were six long rows of a dozen tables with aisles between them and the walls. The aligned tables all faced the front wall where the main table was. Harry tried not to nervously shuffle his feet, feeling most of those in the room staring at him. There were two others at the main table, but he and Dumbledore took the middle. Aage Brown went to the far side of the platform where two other people were standing (Harry assumed they were Healers as well).

The area on the platform in front of the main table had been cleared, save for a chair that could be adjusted to recline back or made into a makeshift bed. There was a small side table beside the three healers with some instruments on it, but Harry couldn't identify them. He supposed it was for monitoring the healing process, or at least that's what he hoped.

"I would like to call this meeting to order, and begin by introducing Mr. Harry Potter,

who has graciously agreed to come and relieve any doubts concerning the Lycanthropy cure," Dumbledore began once he had taken his place at the front center. He subtly motioned Harry to take the seat beside the chair placed next to his.

There were some doubtful mutterings at this, but no one spoke up enough to make themselves heard.

"As I am his escort, he is also under my protection."

"The floor recognizes Mr. Harry Potter," someone said. Harry didn't know who had spoken.

"Thank you. I would also like to thank Healer and Representative Aage Brown, Healer Timothy Chekhov, and Healer Mathew Garson for monitoring the proceedings today."

They were then recognized by the floor as well.

"Now, let us acknowledge the nations that have previously agreed to partake in the cure verification and begin the purpose of this meeting," Dumbledore continued.

With that, the fourteen nations, who had agreed to bring an individual with Lycanthropy, rose and introduced themselves and the willing participant from their country. However, Harry noticed that some 'willing participants' didn't appear too willing. In fact, some of them looked down right petrified, as if they had no idea why they were even there. However, others were clearly anxious, staring at him with uneasy hope. What had these people been told, or, rather, what had they not been told?

Once the participants had been introduced, Dumbledore stood and led Harry in front of the main table and to the cleared area. Those on the floor watched.

Aage shook his hand again for show before Harry turned to the man beside him.

"Hello, Mr. Potter, I am Healer Chekhov," the rather small, elderly, Russian man said, holding out his hand. "I have been told you can do miracles?" Harry wasn't sure if he was teasing him or just making conversation. With the accent it was hard to tell.

"I've been told I can," Harry said, taking his hand. "But I just try my best to help."

"As do we all," the next Healer said, stepping up. "I am Healer Garson. Is there anything we should know before you begin?"

"Well, when the curse is destroyed, most of the magic left over from it comes into me. I call it white magic," Harry answered as he shook the man's hand.

"Where does the rest go?" he asked.

"It stays in the patient. I use the white magic now to help me destroy the curse. I believe it acts as a kind of antidote against it."

"Hmm, I see," Garson said, intrigued.

"That makes sense. Whenever a curse is destroyed, it does leave residual magic. It's how we can trace certain spells and such," Chekhov added.

"Well, is there anything else, Mr. Potter?" Aage asked.

"No, but don't touch me while I heal. It's distracting and I don't know what would happen to you."

"Sound advice," Chekhov said.

"Are you ready, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded, pulling up his sleeve to reveal Coral. "We are."

Revealing Coral instantly caused many on the floor to shift and whispers to flare up, until Dumbledore lifted his hand for silence. The Healers just blinked and stared at her curiously; obviously they had expected her.

"This is Mr. Potter's familiar, Coral. She helps in his method of healing, for those of you who didn't know. Now then, would the fourteen to be cured please come up here?" Dumbledore asked, looking to the countries that had brought 'volunteers'.

Half of them eagerly came up, while a few others had to be urged forward, none-too-gently, by some rather fierce looking individuals. Harry didn't like that, but kept his mouth shut. He also noticed that some were bound and had guards on either side of them, while others had no restraints, magical or otherwise, and looked a bit like Professor Lupin — wary and rough.

The fourteen individuals formed a line in front of the platform, the first being a woman in her mid-thirties. She looked rather drawn and her left hand trembled slightly in the bonds around her wrists as she lifted her face to meet Harry's. She had a guard beside her with a wand trained on her. He looked rather cruel and ruthless, and his eyes held no pity or understanding for the woman, just malice.

Harry's jaw clenched at the guard's treatment of her. For whatever reason, it made his blood boil. Even though Harry didn't know anything about the woman, only that she was from Lithuania, it didn't seem right to treat someone like that who was already victimized by their condition.

:I believe they are waiting for you, Harry: Coral hissed after a moment.

Harry touched Coral on her head with his finger in acknowledgement, before taking a step toward the woman.

"Not too close, young man," the guard stated, straightening in preparation.

In preparation for what, Harry didn't know.

"I can't heal her unless I touch her," Harry stated, not breaking eye contact with the woman. "Come and sit here, if you want to be cured," he said, holding out his hand for her.

Dumbledore came beside Harry, though he was certain the woman wouldn't try anything. It was more of a show for those watching.

"I will ensure Mr. Potter's safety," he told the guard. "Allow Mr. Potter to do what he has been asked to by this chamber."

The guard backed off and the woman got onto the platform and went to the empty chair.

"How long have you been sick, ma'am?" Harry asked, deciding he would not call her a werewolf.

"F-for seventeen years," she said, her English a bit rough.

"I have healed a man who had been sick for most of his life," Harry told her. "You'll be free of this curse soon. Now, I want you to relax. I will have to have Professor Dumbledore cast a body-bind on you, but he'll lift it once I am finished."

She nodded shakily, a bit overwhelmed with everything that had happened to her in the past few days.

"Professor?" Harry asked, looking to Dumbledore as he came to the woman's side.

The Headmaster nodded and quickly waved his waved at the woman, silently freezing her in place with the same spell Snape had cast on Mr. McCaffrey.

"Mr. Potter, why the body-bind?" Aage asked while Healer Gargov jotted something down on his clipboard he had just conjured.

"When I cured Andy, I had to hold him down because his muscles sort of . . . spasmed, I guess would be the word. I had someone place a body-bind on Mr. McCaffrey when I had healed him, and even with the spell, I could feel his muscles straining to move as I destroyed the curse. After I'm done though, their muscles are fine. I think it's the curse rebelling. The curse is a very . . . violent thing."

"Yes, it is. Well, whenever you are ready, Mr. Potter," Aage said gently, having taken a scan of the woman to be compared to the 'after-healed' one.

Harry nodded and approached the chair with the woman, rolling up his sleeve, fully exposing Coral, who was wearing her silk 'sweater', which covered about four inches of her, starting an inch behind her head.

Everyone in the chamber watched with bated breath as the healers prepared to document the event.

Harry placed his hand at the center of the woman's chest, focusing only on what he was going to do as he placed his other hand on her forehead. Her eyes followed his left hand, her eyes crossing as she took in Coral around his left wrist.

Harry exhaled, once again centering himself as he closed his eyes, but this time, he consciously called forth the white magic, instead of his normal magic. Perhaps this way he would not tire as quickly as he would otherwise.

:Curse, be no more: he hissed, to the horrified curiosity of those on the floor, as his now glowing white eyes snapped open, staring into the terrified blue of the woman's.

The white magic surged forward from Harry, relentless in its attack of the curse, effortlessly obliterating it within the woman, until . . . white magic rose from the ashes of the curse. It did the same it had in Andy and Walter, most of it departing into Harry while a small amount remained in the core of the patient.

Harry closed his eyes, willing the magic to calm, which it obediently did.

"Unbind her, professor. The curse is gone," he said, after sending his magic out a bit to confirm. She was clean.

Dumbledore did so, but, before she could get up, Harry took hold of her bound wrists.

"Let me take care of this as well, since you are here," he stated. "I can tell it's been sprained, at the very least."

She stared at him, beyond words, as he quickly healed her wrist damaged from the rough handling of her guard when he had bound her.

With that, Harry stepped back and the woman dissolved into quiet sobs as she returned to the bewildered guard. The healers had taken a scan of her before she had gotten off the stage.

Healer Chekhov quickly got to work in comparing the scans, but it would take a few hours before he got the results. Primarily, he was wanting proof that this was or wasn't a cure. If the first scan told them she was a werewolf and the second that she wasn't . . . well, there you go.

Harry looked to the next one in line, ignoring the astonished looks of all the others in the ICW. Evidently, the white flash, his glowing eyes, and the weeping woman had been impressive.

The next was a young boy from Nepal, not much older than himself. He was shadowed by a woman, but she didn't appear to be like the man who had been guarding the Lithuanian woman.

"Do I have to be made still?" the boy asked, nervously glancing at Dumbledore.

"It makes it easier for me to heal you. Otherwise I have to hold you down myself," Harry said honestly.

"Oh . . . okay. It doesn't hurt, does it?" The boy obviously didn't care that he was being heard by all in the chamber or that such a question made him appear weak.

Harry turned his eyes to the woman he had just cured, to the shock of most there. "Did it hurt?"

She shook her head, still too overcome with emotion to speak.

That must have been all that the boy needed, for he took his place on the chair and gave a nod to Harry.

Harry cured him, the whole process easier than the previous.

And so it went. He healed the next, and then the next. Each case came and went so quickly that Harry no longer bothered calling the white magic back to his center after

each healing, allowing his eyes to glow hot white as each person came up to be healed. All the while the healers jotted things down, took scans, and documented.

The ninth person came up, standing tall and proud. He was from New Zealand and had no guards or bonds, but he did have some kind of collar around his neck. It seemed to be magical.

"I had expected a man, not a child," he said as he stepped up to the platform and sat down on the chair. "But it is just as well."

:This man seems to be more accepting of what the curse has made him: Coral stated.

"How long have you been this way?" Harry asked. He found that asking the question got his magic ready. Whether it was a conscious or subconscious thing, he didn't know.

"For one-hundred-and-sixty-seven moons," he answered.

"You seem rather calm about it, sir," Harry observed.

"I have come to accept what I am, but now that there is a way I can end it, I shall welcome it."

"Good, because I won't heal those who don't want to be healed," Harry stated.

"I want to be healed," he stated.

So Harry healed him.

He healed a few more, but as he came to the thirteenth, he paused as the old man came up and sat.

He appeared to be in deplorable condition. Harry was actually impressed he had made it up the few steps onto the platform, but as the frail man got closer, Harry frowned.

"You're not a werewolf," Harry blurted.

There was a sudden uproar. People began yelling at the old man, while others were yelling at Harry, telling him he was lying and that the man had to be a werewolf — he wouldn't have been brought otherwise. Others were shouting in outrage, saying this was deplorable behavior of representatives and members of the ICW.

"He has to be a werewolf!"

"This is an outrage! How dare your country bring someone not a werewolf! This meeting was to prove Mr. Potter can in fact heal werewolves, not to deceive the ICW with foolhardy tricks!" another said, shouting at the old man.

"The boy is obviously mistaken," another representative said.

"Your leaders had agreed to secure a werewolf and bring them here to prove or disprove this alleged cure, not waste time!"

Harry just stood there, staring at the old man who wasn't a werewolf.

"***SILENCE!***" Dumbledore roared, casting a massive silencing charm on all on the floor. "Now, let's discuss this like civilized people," he stated, turning to the man in the chair. "Sir, are you a werewolf or aren't you?" he asked.

"No, I'm not," the old man said gruffly, straightening and suddenly looking less pathetic.

There was some heated shuffling, but no one on the floor was able to speak, thanks to the Supreme Mugwump's spell.

"Why did you come up here then?"

The man glanced at the representative from his country, who was to the far back right of the chamber. Dumbledore waved his hand at the representative the fake-werewolf pointed to, lifting the spell from him.

"I believe many here would like an explanation, Mr. Lee," the Supreme Mugwump stated.

"My higher-ups and their allies decided this would be a good opportunity to get to the truth, and we have still kept our end of the deal. My nation has a werewolf here to be cured, but we wanted to see if Mr. Potter would be able to know if he was actually treating an individual with Lycanthropy or not. After all, if he can't, how can this cure be genuine?" he said.

Harry could tell the man was well respected. He was sharp and had a charisma that ebbed from him. His words had actually alleviated some rage from a number of people. And, even Harry had to admit, it was a good test. Not exactly a fair or kind one, but it did what they desired and he could see why they wanted it.

"I see. So where is your people's werewolf?" Dumbledore asked.

"Somewhere in this room. I ask, as representative of my nation and spokesman of fifteen others in this, that Mr. Potter come down here and find them."

The eyes of the room returned to Harry.

Harry stepped forward, looking quite impressive with his stance and white magic that was still pulsing in his eyes. He went down from the platform, Dumbledore following behind him with the three healers. Harry paused at the last person in line who was to be cured.

"You're not a werewolf either," he said.

The woman shook her head.

"Her nation is one of the countries who agreed to perform this test," Mr. Hubble said, feeling a few angry eyes fall back to him. "The real fourteenth is in here as well."

It was a good thing Dumbledore had yet to fully lift the silencing spell. People were furious, but not for the same reasons. Some were angry because of the deceit, others because there were werewolves hidden among them!

Harry continued forward, ignoring those around him watching his every step.

:Coral?:

:I am not sensing them here. Let's continue down the aisle:

:Yeah, I don't sense anything close either: Harry agreed, not bothering to feel bad about scaring an older gentleman he had passed by in speaking parseltongue.

Harry continued down the next aisle, going back up toward the front left. He slowed, sensing the familiar feeling he got in class from Professor Lupin.

He turned toward a young intern, the assistant to the French representative.

"You have Lycanthropy," Harry said.

Several people gasped, though it was unheard.

She blinked and took a heavy swallow, her eyes filling with amazed and apologetic tears. Dumbledore lifted the silence from her.

"Yes. I'm sorry for the deceit, but . . . we wanted to be sure this was true," she said.

"Do you want to be cured?" Harry asked, not sure how he felt about the whole mess right then. He just wanted to be done for the day. He was getting really tired of the stares and was looking forward to being back at Hogwarts.

"Yes! Yes, please," she said earnestly.

He motioned for her to sit and he healed her right then and there after a quick body-bind cast by Dumbledore, who then lifted it once she was cured.

There was no one doubting Harry anymore, and soon, once their tests came back from the newly cured, no one outside the ICW would be able to hold reasonable doubt against him either.

Harry finished walking that side of the chamber, still not finding the hidden werewolf. Finally, he began heading to the back right.

:I sense it: Harry stated.

:Yes: Coral agreed. :They are nearby:

Harry came to a stop in front of Mr. Lee.

"You," Harry said, surprised himself.

The man smiled sadly. "Yes. Me," he whispered, but his voice was rich in power and authority.

Everyone who knew the respected representative stared in absolute amazement. How had they never suspected?

"I have been a werewolf for five years. I became a representative in hopes of helping fellow werewolves in society, but now it seems I will need to find another reason to remain a representative, for I believe the curse of Lycanthropy has truly met its match in you, Mr. Potter. I bow to your ability and hope you may continue to bestow your gift upon myself and my brethren."

Keeping his legs straight, the black haired man bowed, bending at the waist.

Harry didn't know what compelled him. Perhaps it was the white magic, but he raised his hand and placed it upon the man's head, and, without the body-bind, hissed, :Curse, be no more:

The white magic that he had accumulated for the day obliterated the curse within the man so quickly that the man's muscles had no time to respond. An instant later, after the large white flash, the curse-free man stood, becoming yet another individual who would be a lifetime ally of . . . the Slumbering Mage.

O o O o O

After getting the results from the first few scans an hour later, which all proved that Harry had successfully cured their Lycanthropy, it had nearly been impossible to politely leave. It was only thanks to Dumbledore stating he had a school to run that finally got them to reluctantly bid them farewell.

The Healers were ecstatic with what they had gathered from the scans, and they hoped to begin analyzing the 'white magic' as soon as possible to perhaps synthesize more to begin healing others without Harry.

Harry and Dumbledore wished them luck, before the meeting was adjourned and everyone went their separate ways, most eager to spread the news of what they had witnessed.

"I think Madam Pomfrey would like to examine you before anything else," Dumbledore said.

"I'm fine, sir, really. I'm not really that tired at all. I think it's because I just let the white magic do the work, instead of using my magic like I had with Andy and then had begun to use with Mr. McCaffrey," Harry answered after having collected himself. They had used a long-distance portkey to take them to the Headmaster's office.

"Hmm. Well, just the same, I doubt Madam Pomfrey would be very happy with either of us if I didn't take you to the infirmary first, and we don't want her upset with us, do we?" the Headmaster asked.

"I suppose not," Harry agreed.

"However, a few more minutes here won't hurt anything," Dumbledore said, moving around his desk and opening a drawer. "I had meant to give this to you on Christmas, but decided it might be better to wait. I'm not too sure Mrs. Longbottom would have liked the idea of you receiving this while under her care," he said, pulling out a folded garment of some sort.

"What is it?" Harry asked, approaching slowly.

"Your father allowed me to borrow this, but I hadn't been able to return it to him. I

believe it is time for you to have it."

Dumbledore held it out for him to take, not saying anything else.

Harry took it, feeling the cool smooth cloth sink between his fingers. He let it fall slightly so it would unfold.

"A cloak?" Harry asked.

"Go ahead and put it on," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling with some mischief.

Harry did so, wondering what this was about.

He looked down at himself, wondering what it looked like, only. . . .

"My body's gone!"

Dumbledore couldn't help it, he laughed. "No, it's just invisible," he said lightly, now only chuckling. "It is an invisibility cloak. They're quite rare, and yours especially is very special."

"Wow."

"Your father got it from his father, and his from his father and so on. I believe it goes back for about a dozen generations."

Harry's eyes widened, brushing his hand across the invisible fabric, wondering how many Potters had held it before him, and taking in the fact that the last had been his father.

"Thank you, sir," Harry managed.

"You're welcome, Harry. Use it well."

O o O o O

Severus breathed a sigh of relief when he learned Harry and the Headmaster were in the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey no doubt making sure Harry hadn't overexerted himself in healing the fourteen werewolves.

Severus shook his head. How the ICW thought having Harry heal all of those werewolves in one day was a good idea was beyond him, but hopefully all was well and nothing horrible had occurred.

He supposed he would see at dinner. He wondered if Harry and the Headmaster had eaten lunch. It wouldn't surprise him if they hadn't. It was approaching the late afternoon, and if the ICW was true to form, they had been too cheap to provide lunch for all their members and visitors — that and people were ever so picky with what they would eat.

Severus stepped out of his dungeons, deciding he had brewed enough for the day.

"Hello, Professor," one of his Slytherins, who had stayed for the holidays, greeted as he passed by.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Huller."

There was less than a week left for the holidays, and Severus was actually looking forward to classes beginning again. He wanted to get back into a nice routine, and wanted Harry to be included in that routine, instead of having to wonder what was going on around the boy and what he would do next. At least here in Hogwarts, Severus and the other professors had some control of whatever he would get into, as long as they were vigilant — meaning they had to be much more observant than last time.

And willing to listen.

But that aside, the only thing that was weighing heavily on his mind now was what was to come of the events at the ICW. He knew it was very likely that they would want Harry to begin periodically healing mass amounts of werewolves. However, the question about whether or not Harry would be able to do it wasn't his main concern.

It was the reactions of the werewolves who didn't want to be healed.

He highly doubted Fenrir Greyback would happily come in and ask to be healed. It was very likely that the monster was currently seething some place, trying to think of a way to stop Harry from curing other werewolves.

O o O o O

"I wonder what the elves have planned for us tonight," Dumbledore said.

"Albus, you do ask them never to tell you," Minerva said as they headed to the Great Hall. "You like the surprise, if I recall."

Harry had gone off to the Hufflepuff dormitory to unpack his things before dinner. He had also wanted to make sure Dobby and Hedwig had settled in alright. His check

up with Madam Pomfrey had gone smoothly. It seemed he had been right; allowing the white magic to do the work had saved him from exhaustion. It was certainly good news, especially if he ever needed to heal many werewolves in one day again.

"I do hope they have some steaks tonight. Having skipped lunch, a nice rare steak sounds awfully good," he said.

McGonagall gave him a sidelong glance. "'Rare'? When did you acquire a taste for that?"

"Hm, recently, I suppose," he said with a shrug, entering the Great Hall with her.

Minerva shook her head at him before focusing her attention to those in the hall.

There were the Weasleys and two others in her house, a few from Slytherin, five from Ravenclaw, and three from Hufflepuff — well, four now, counting Harry. The holidays rarely had more than thirty students remain behind at Hogwarts, and this year was no different.

Her eyes fell upon Harry, who had taken a seat beside a fellow Hufflepuff who was closest to his age — Mara Gates, a third year girl.

McGonagall gave a quiet smile as she watched him introduce Coral to Mara.

O o O o O

"How did it go, Albus?" Flitwick asked as dinner started.

"It went quite well, Filius. All fourteen were healed, and before we had left, the Healers had already been able to determine the cure was a success on the first few Harry had healed," he answered, happily placing a juicy steak onto his plate.

"And Harry? I saw him leaving the infirmary earlier," Flitwick stated.

"He's well. He admitted to me that when healing Andy and Mr. McCaffrey he had primarily used his normal magic. Evidently, using the white magic takes very little effort for him to use, so he isn't as tired as I had expected."

"Oh, splendid!" Flitwick said, glancing briefly at Remus, who had yet to look up from his plate.

"Yes, it is very good news. I had been worried he would push himself too far today," Dumbledore admitted, before taking a bite from the red steak. "Mmm, the elves certainly have outdone themselves tonight. This is excellent. Anyways, I had been

concerned with how things would go today. I'm glad everything has turned out as they have."

"Do you know what the ICW plans to do from here?" McGonagall asked.

"No, though I believe a number of them will want to look more closely into this white magic."

"Understandable. I imagine, it has a great deal of potential," Flitwick said.

Dumbledore nodded, taking another bite.

Conversation branched from there, talking about the coming year and how they were looking forward to beginning lessons again. Before long, dinner came to an end, and the students headed back to their dorms and the professors left the Great Hall as well.

O o O o O

Severus fell into step beside Dumbledore as they left the Great Hall.

"Ah, Severus. Well, I think you would have been pleased to have seen how Harry handled himself today at the ICW."

"The fact that he returned without fatigue was a relief enough," Severus replied frankly. "Besides, you know how well dignitaries and I get along."

Dumbledore smiled softly. "Yes, they are quite wary of you."

"Not as wary as I am of them," he returned as they continued down the hall, Dumbledore closest to the wall.

"Yes, well, there are a few who really do seek to–"

The Headmaster faltered, having to immediately lift his hand to the wall to stabilize himself.

"Headmaster?" Severus asked, quickly moving forward and grabbing hold of the older man's arm in case his legs gave out.

Dumbledore tightly closed his eyes before blinking several times at the floor, as if trying to get rid of something in his vision.

"I'm alright, Severus, just got a little dizzy there for a moment," he said, no longer

bracing his hand against the wall. However, his color was definitely off.

"Let's go to the infirmary and have Madam Pomfrey take a look at you."

"No, I'm quite alright now. It's been a long day, and age, it seems, has begun catching up with me. I'm fine."

Severus narrowed his eyes, but he couldn't really argue with the man. "Very well, but if you feel ill tomorrow, I'm calling her."

"Duly noted."

Severus escorted the Headmaster up to his rooms before bidding him goodnight, and the fact that his mentor didn't object worried him.

Nothing like this had happened last time, and as far as he knew the old man had never fallen ill, not in all the years he knew him. Sure, he had heard Madam Pomfrey refer to the time he had caught the Wizard's Flu, but that was when he had first become Headmaster, which was years before Severus had even been born.

Something was seriously going on here. Something that should not be brushed aside.

After years of surviving a horrible war, Severus had learned not to ignore certain feelings, and the feeling he was getting now was yelling at him to act. It had yet to steer him wrong, so Severus quickly decided what to do.

Closing his eyes and hoping no one would ever find out, he called his house elf the moment he was within the walls of his private chambers.

"Mittens."

-Pop-

"Yes, master?"

"I have an important mission for you, something *no one* can *ever* find out about."

Mittens stood at attention, all 30 inches of her. "What shall Mittens do?"

O o O o O

Elsewhere. . . .

"Are you sure you're alright, Timothy? You're looking a bit peaky."

Timothy Chekhov sat on the couch beside his wife.

"I'm fine, honey. Today was just a big day, that's all."

O o O

"How was he, grandpa? Is he really like what they say? Can he really cure people?" a little boy asked.

"Yes, he cured them all, releasing a bright white flash when he did so," the older man said, gratefully sinking into the chair and closing his eyes.

"Grandpa?"

"Huh?"

"Are you getting sick?"

"No-no, it's just be a long day. I got to see Harry Potter, you know," he said teasingly, though it was clear he was growing tired.

Tired and feeling under the weather, just like a dozen other people who had been present at the ICW meeting earlier that day, and close to Harry Potter when he had healed the fourteen werewolves. . . .

O o O o O

A/N: Well, there it is.

Next part, *White Magic*, is under construction.

White Magic

A/N: I was surprised by the number and types of theories people came up with concerning the illness. Certainly interesting. Well, I hope my explanation suffices.

Part 15: White Magic

Mittens silently popped into the private chambers of the Headmaster. She was understandably nervous. Normally, only the Headmaster's personal house elves entered here, but her master had given her a mission, and she was going to carry it out!

Quietly entering a side room, which served as a living room, she waited, knowing Socky, the Headmaster's favorite house elf, would sense her presence soon, and come to her to ask why she was there.

She didn't need to wait long.

-Pop-

"Mittens? Why have yous come here? Does Mittens' master have a message to be delivered to Master Dumbledore?"

"No, Master Snape has given Mittens an important mission to pass on to Socky, because Mittens has no hope of doing it."

"Oh?"

"Your great master is sick, my master is certain. He's asked Mittens to make sure Socky and the other house elves here know. He's also wanting yous to get something."

Socky's eyes widened, nodding fervently. "Socky and the others will care for great Master Dumbledore. Thanks, Mittens, for alerting us. Master did seem tired. Wes will make sure Master becomes well again. What is Mittens' master wanting?"

"A strand of hair from Socky's master and a vial of blood. Master Snape is wanting to find what is causing the Headmaster to be sick before it has a chance to get worse."

Socky frowned.

What she was asking for was a huge deal. Blood and hair could be used in a broad range of spells and potions, most of them very powerful and potentially dangerous

and even harmful to the donor. Much of bloodmagic was forbidden, and for good reason. However, Socky had been ordered by his master – ordered, which was something he rarely ever did – to do whatever the Potions Master believed was best in accordance to the health and wellbeing of the inhabitants of Hogwarts, including himself.

Socky took the vial being offered to him by Mittens. "Socky now understands why Mittens wouldn't be able to do this. Socky will see what he can do. Wait here."

"Oh, and please, Socky, don't tell any ones about this. My master wants this to stay hush-hush."

"This will remain hush-hush, Socky swears it."

-Pop-

O o O

Socky looked around the room he had served in for nearly half a century. With the vial in his hand, he stepped forward purposely. Approaching his master's bed, he peered over the edge to find his old master sleeping.

He wasn't sleeping peacefully, Socky quickly noted. He was frowning and had drops of sweat on his brow. His striped nightcap was askew and his covers were half off the bed. He wasn't tossing and turning, but was, if it was actually possible, too still.

Nodding to himself, Socky came to a decision and skillfully climbed onto the bed.

The Potions Master was correct. His master was sick, but sick with what, Socky didn't know. He had never seen or felt anything like it. It felt . . . alive, and it was very very powerful, which, Socky admitted, made sense. It would have to be powerful to make his master sick. The last time his Master had gotten ill was when he had first become Headmaster. Transitioning the wards had taken a lot out of him, because he had had to replenish them due to Headmaster Dippit's lack of care.

Socky shook his head. Headmaster Dippit had truly been a weak wizard, and not in the magical sense, for he was slightly above average, magically. No, Dippit was weak in the sense of character. Socky didn't like thinking such things about anyone, but it was true. Hogwarts had suffered under Dippit's reign, and it had taken his master years to correct and heal the damage Dippit had caused to Hogwarts. In some ways, Dumbledore was still fixing things, but, unfortunately, Socky doubted his master would be able to ever bring Hogwarts back to the way she should be, particularly in the way she was run. It was because of Dippit that Hogwarts now had

a Board of Governors. Before, the Headmaster ran everything — tuition, admission requirements, scholarships, summer programs . . . everything. And the only way he could be removed from position was by a unanimous vote from the Heads of Houses.

Refocusing, Socky magicked the blankets back onto the bed, lovingly re-tucking his master in. Socky had cared for Dumbledore since he was a boy, and he would never stop caring for him as such.

Becoming determined, Socky waved his hand over his master, placing magic upon him that hadn't been needed since he was a mere child. Sleeping magic. If the Potions Master said he needed hair and blood to help his master, Socky would get it. His master's spy would help make things well again.

Socky expertly pulled out a long silver hair, before looking to Dumbledore's hand.

With the small vial, he knelt forward, before making a tiny cut on his master's forefinger and making it bleed into the three inch tall container until it filled to the rim.

With that, Socky quickly healed the cut over, hoping that he had caused his master no discomfort, even in his sleep.

Socky sealed the vial and got off the bed, stowing the hair and vial into the blue pillowcase he wore before heading toward the door.

"Hmm." Dumbledore shifted, his eyes opening slightly to see what had woken him. "Socky?"

"Socky is here, Master," he said softly, not that surprised his master had been able to overcome the sleeping magic. It was only meant to keep him asleep while he got what he needed.

"What time is it?" he asked groggily.

"2 am, sir. Socky thought Master was needing his blankets. Is Master too hot?"

"No, though I think I could use a drink. I'll head to the kitchens and get some hot cocoa."

Socky swiftly hurried to his master, who was now sitting up — sort of.

"Socky can gets Master's drink, sir. Will master be wanting double chocolate or triple?"

"It's alright, Socky. I can get it," Dumbledore said, putting his hand on the side of his head, trying to right his nightcap as well as force away the sudden dizziness that had risen and was quickly mounting into a sickening spin. He plopped back onto his pillows. "Urgh."

"Master? Is master alright?" Socky asked, quickly becoming quite concerned. "Should Socky get Madam Pomfrey?"

Dumbledore took several calming breaths before answering. "It seems that laying down helps. No, don't get Madam Pomfrey. I'll probably feel better by morning. I don't want to wake her up at this time of night. As muggles would say, this is likely just a twenty-four hour bug anyway."

He closed his eyes, the dizziness disappearing.

"Shall Socky get master a drink then?"

"Yes, but water please. Unfortunately, I don't think sugar is wise in this instance."

"Yes, master. Socky will bring it to master right away."

-Pop-

O o O o O

-Pop-

"Master, Mittens has it!" Mittens said, hurrying to Severus who was already setting things up in his lab.

Severus smiled. "Thank you, Mittens, you can set the two things here."

Mittens happily did so, before pausing and gazing up at her master seriously. "Socky told Mittens the Headmaster couldn't get out of bed to get hot cocoa. He gots too dizzy."

The Potions Master frowned. He was right then. Something serious was going on.

"Then I shall get to work right away. If you wish, Mittens, you may begin heating this up for me while I prepare a portion of his blood Socky obtained."

"Yes, Master."

And so, Master and elf got down to work, trying to get to the bottom of whatever was

ailing the headmaster.

Several hours later, the sun rising above the horizon, Severus stared at his findings.

"Mittens, would you go see if Lupin is up? I think we may need something from him, if he would be willing. I may have figured out what is going on. I only hope I'm right."

"Yes, Master."

-Pop-

O o O o O

8 am – Hogwarts

Remus didn't know what this was about, but the fact that Severus' personal house elf had come to get him immediately told him this was important. And so, he soon found himself knocking on the door to Severus' personal lab in the dungeons.

"Come in," Severus' smooth voice stated from the other side.

Hesitantly, Remus entered.

"Close the door behind you," the potions master stated, not looking up at him, but looking at something through some sort of devise on the table.

A microscope?

"Severus, is something the matter?" Remus asked, closing the door before moving forward.

"No, nothing is wrong, at least I don't believe so. However, I've asked you here to help me prove it. I need a sample of your blood."

"A sample of my what? What is this about?" Remus asked, quickly growing suspicious.

Asking for a sample of someone's blood was a very personal request, after all. It could be used to do a lot of things, good and evil.

"Lupin, this is important, I wouldn't ask for it otherwise. Don't worry, it's not going to be involved in any potions."

Remus breathed out. "Very well. How much do you need?"

"Just a drop. Place it on this slide, please," Severus said, sliding a small rectangular sheet of glass toward him.

"What is this about?" Remus asked as he pointed his wand at his finger, making a pin prick which then allowed him to ooze a drop of blood onto the slide.

"I'll tell you once we're through," he said, taking the slide from Remus. He then placed a drop of red liquid, from a three-inch tall vial, right beside Remus' blood sample, and mixed them.

Remus snatched up the vial of blood from the table as Severus placed the slide under the magic microscope to examine it.

"Whoa, now whose blood is this? And why did you just mix it with mine?" Remus asked, now really wanting to get to the bottom of this.

Severus didn't answer him, so Remus sniffed the blood.

"What in Merlin's name are you doing with a vial of the Headmaster's blood? !"

Severus looked up from the microscope, his face not giving anything away. "What makes you think it's the Headmaster's?"

"I have my ways," Remus stated, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, if you must know, yes, that is the Headmaster's."

"How the bloody hell did you get it?"

Severus looked back to the microscope. "I have my ways."

"Severus, I swear, if you don't tell me what is going on right now, I'm going to—"

"The headmaster fell ill late last night."

That quickly altered Remus' feelings of the situation. "Oh my, is he alright?"

"I believe he will be, but his system is having to adjust to something, which is why I needed to ask you here."

"Alright . . ." Remus said, trying to follow. "But that still doesn't explain what you hope to accomplish with what you just did."

"He somehow got Potter's white magic in his system. I believe he had been exposed

to enough at the ICW for the white magic to become concentrated enough to enter him. And now it seems that it is trying to incorporate itself into his core, just as it has with those Potter has healed."

"This has to do with Lycanthropy?"

"Just look at this. It will become clear to you," Severus said, motioning him over to the microscope.

"This is a muggle device," Remus stated, confused.

"Yes, which I have altered slightly to aid me in potion making. This microscope can see magic at the microscopic level, as well as all the other things muggles can see with it. There is more to potions than simply mixing things together, you know. There is actually a science to it, and looking at the heart of ingredients — oh, never mind. Just look."

Remus blinked, before doing as he was told.

"Um, what am I seeing?"

He could see dozens of little donut looking things floating around among other shapes. There were some donuts with an odd dark mist around them, while others just looked like simple red donuts.

"Most of what you're seeing are the Headmaster's red blood cells and your own — the donut shapes. Yours are the ones with the dark residue," Severus explained while Remus continued looking.

"What are these white globby looking things?"

"Those are the Headmaster's white blood cells. Just keep watching."

"Oh, my gosh!"

A white blood cell, which seemed to be pulsing white, suddenly charged a few of his red blood cells and sucked the black mist away, absorbing the mess and becoming even brighter before continuing on to the next cluster of infected red blood cells, leaving healthy ones in its wake.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"If you think it's a cure for Lycanthropy, you're very likely correct. But I believe it is more than that. I believe it is a vaccine as well. I believe if the Headmaster were to

be bitten by a werewolf, he wouldn't need to worry about becoming one. He is immune."

O o O o O

10 am – Ministry

"Madam, this may be the beginnings of an epidemic!" the Minister exclaimed.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Minister. Let's just take a step back and look at the facts," Madam Bones stated, before turning to a healer. "How many have taken ill?"

"Well, that's just it, when asked, they say they don't feel sick, just a bit under the weather. Most of them don't even really have fevers, they just look awful and have no energy," he answered.

"Who's getting sick? Is there anything in common between them save for having been present at the ICW meeting yesterday?"

"They're all over sixty, though a few younger individuals have admitted to feeling a little off, but they don't have any other notable issues."

"How many?"

"Only fifteen, not counting those feeling 'off'. It hasn't appeared to spread at all, so that's something."

"Have you been able to detect anything? A curse, poison, illness?" Bones rattled off.

"No, nothing. We don't know what's causing it, but a few of the patients do seem to be getting better. At the moment, we don't believe this is life threatening, but for it to have come on so quickly is worrisome, assuming it was caused by something at the ICW meeting. Another thing that is odd is that it seems to be more severe with those who are older or those with particularly strong magic."

Bones frowned. "Do we have the seating chart of the meeting? We could see if these people were close together. Perhaps there is a connection there."

They quickly brought out a seating chart and began marking those who had become 'sick'. Sure enough, there were notable clusters.

The first few front rows, closest to the main table, had the most. But, to the far left, near the French assistant, was another group, which was a bit smaller than the last group, positioned to the back right, surrounding Mr. Lee's seat.

Madam Bones looked up from the page. "I think we all understand what this means. Mr. Potter is somehow the cause."

"The white magic?" the Healer asked.

"It must be."

O o O o O

10 am – Hogwarts

The Headmaster had missed breakfast. He had missed breakfast and hadn't sent a note or anything. Even Severus and Remus had sent a note, stating they were working on something down in the dungeons and would miss breakfast.

It was very unlike Dumbledore to not notify her, even when classes weren't in session, so Minerva decided to head up to his office to see if he had forgotten about the time and had stayed up all night or something. He had done something like that before, having been buried in paperwork and totally spacing on breakfast.

Going up, the gargoyle swiftly moving aside, she knocked on his office door before stepping in, as she often just entered after announcing her presence with a knock.

The place was quiet and she didn't see him at his desk or anywhere in his office. She glanced over his desk, hoping for a note to her, telling where he had gone or something.

Nothing.

"Hmm." She looked around to the portraits, most of which were watching her expectantly. "Have you seen the Headmaster today?" she asked.

"No, we have not. We had been hoping you would know what was going on. We believe he is still in his private chambers, though," Quentin Trimble said, a previous headmaster.

Minerva frowned, walking to the door leading to Dumbledore's rooms. Gathering herself, she opened the door and entered, closing the door to his office behind her.

"Albus?" she asked, her voice echoing off the walls. "Are you here?"

-Pop-

"Oh! Socky, you scared me."

"Socky is sorry, Professor, but Socky felt Professor McGonagall would like to know Master is sleeping and should not be disturbed."

"Sleeping? It's past 10."

"Master is . . . not feeling well, so Socky insisted he sleep to get better. His fever has gone down now."

"That man. Does he not know we have Madam Pomfrey for a reason?" McGonagall questioned, glancing past Socky toward Dumbledore's bedroom. "When did he start getting sick, what are his symptoms?"

"Last night, Socky thinks. Master told Socky Professor Snape escorted him to his room."

"And his symptoms?"

"Mostly weak and dizzy, but Master says laying down helps and it is nothing to worry about."

"'Weak and dizzy,' 'nothing to worry about'? If he wasn't sick, I would drag him down to the infirmary by his beard."

"Oh, please, Professor McGonagall, let him sleep. Socky is sure he will be better soon."

McGonagall sighed, unable to continue her rant as she saw how desperate Socky was to allow his master to continue sleeping.

"Very well, but I have to tell Madam Pomfrey. She would be very displeased with all of us if she learned about this later."

"Okay, Professor, Socky understands."

"Let me know when he wakes."

"Yes, Professor McGonagall."

O o O o O

Dumbledore woke to the sound of . . . something outside his quarters. In his office, perhaps? It sounded like voices. He glanced at the clock on his nightstand.

11:14 am.

Wow, had he really just slept over half the day away?

Sitting up and pleased he felt no dizzy spell, he got up and began getting ready; however, he did find that his muscles were sore, as if he was in the middle of getting over a serious cold. Placing his wizard hat on, he felt like he needed to sit down for a moment before heading to his office.

"Master?"

He turned and found Socky staring at him from across the room.

"Yes, Socky?"

"How is Master feeling?"

"I'm still not quite myself, but I'm feeling better than I was earlier," he said.

"Socky is glad. Socky was very worried."

Dumbledore gave him a soft smile before motioning him over to him. Socky hugged Dumbledore's knees, his large floppy ears hanging low.

"I'm quite alright, my friend. From time to time, everyone falls ill, even myself."

Socky nodded, collecting himself. "Professor McGonagall and some others are in your office, Master. Shall I go and tell them to go away? Socky knows they woke Master up."

"No, I should go see what the fuss is all about. It almost sounded like arguing earlier. I do hope Cornelius hasn't done something foolish again."

"Is Master sure he shouldn't just go back to bed? Master is still looking pale," Socky insisted, going to the bed and pulling back the covers, trying to encourage the Headmaster to get back to bed.

"Socky, I promise I will take it easy. Stop worrying."

"Okay, Master," Socky sighed.

With that, Dumbledore trudged across his quarters and quietly entered his office through the side door that often went unnoticed by visitors. By the time he got to his office, part of him was wondering if he should have taken Socky's advice and gone

back to bed, but such thoughts quickly vanished as he saw that there was a conversation going on in his office. He remained where he was, within sight of them, but unnoticed.

"He's still resting, Madam Bones," Minerva said, standing in the middle of the office.

"Does that mean he has taken ill as well?" Madam Bones questioned, standing by the fireplace. "How sick is he? So far, there have been over a dozen cases, and we've found that the older and stronger the wizard, magically, the more severe the symptoms. Has Madam Pomfrey taken a look at him?"

"Not yet. We have taken the Headmaster's house elf at his word, trusting that Albus is fine, just tired. We didn't want to wake him unnecessarily, and Severus supported the house elf's course of action," Minerva explained.

"Professor Snape? No offense, but why would your support mean anything?" Bones asked, turning to the Potions Master.

"I have been able to study certain things surrounding the white magic from Mr. Potter, which is clearly the cause of the events here. I believe no permanent harm will befall anyone it interacts with, and your statement that most who have taken ill are now recovering supports my belief."

Bones looked piercingly at Severus, as if measuring him up. "Very well. Your theory does seem to have merit. Do you have any other theories to go along with this?"

"If you want my humble opinion, I believe those who absorb this white magic into themselves become immune to Lycanthropy. I am also certain this could be made into a distributable cure and vaccine, if one were to transfuse it directly into the bloodstream from an individual who has already gained the immunity."

"A blood transfusion? I don't believe the Wizarding World would feel that route safe," Bones stated.

"One must understand blood types, of course, as Muggles do, and go from there, but it isn't difficult. Even some of my first years could handle such a concept and carry it out if given the tools."

"I will take this idea to the Healers and see what they think of it."

"Well, if it helps, we have a willing participant to give it a trial run."

"Is this individual a werewolf?" Bones asked, incredulously.

"Yes. He understands the dangers and would be willing to give it a go here, if that would be agreeable with the Healers' schedules and can be arranged," Severus continued, ignoring Minerva's amazed expression and turning toward the far corner. "What do you think, Headmaster?"

"I think it's a splendid idea, Severus," Dumbledore answered, not surprised at suddenly being included.

Bones and McGonagall quickly turned, finding the Headmaster standing in the doorway that was at the corner beside one of Dumbledore's many bookcases.

"Albus, what are you doing up?" Minerva asked, honestly a bit concerned with the how Dumbledore was looking.

"Well, the last time I checked, this was my office," he replied with a smile, making his way over to his desk.

The others watched, noting how he took careful steps before sinking, relieved, into his chair.

"How are you feeling, Headmaster?" Madam Bones asked, her eyes taking in the paleness of his cheeks.

"Oh, I've been better, I'll admit, though I'm sure I'll live. But my health aside, I see no trouble doing as Severus suggests, though I am unclear as to how this trial will be carried out exactly."

"I honestly doubt it can be arranged by the time classes start, but I will see what can be done. As for how the trial will be run, I leave that to Severus, that is, if the Healers agree to such an operation in the first place," Bones said.

"We shall simply have to wait and see then," Dumbledore said.

"Well, I hope you feel better soon, Headmaster. I will take my leave now. The Minister is no doubt becoming impatient," Bones said, before promptly leaving.

Severus and Minerva turned their focus on Dumbledore.

"So how are you *really* feeling, Albus?" Minerva asked, her voice alone telling both men in the room that a partial answer or a fib would not bode well.

Dumbledore's shoulders sagged slightly. Now that Bones was gone, he didn't feel like he needed to keep up appearances. "Like a soggy lemon drop," he said finally.

Minerva's eye twitched, and Severus was finding it difficult to keep a straight face.

"An . . . interesting description, Headmaster. Are you still dizzy?" Severus asked.

"Not really, a bit lightheaded, but nothing more."

"How much is 'a bit'?" Minerva questioned, her eyes narrowing.

Dumbledore looked up at her and raised his eyebrows. Clearly he didn't expect to be under such scrutiny. "Enough to be noticed but not overbearingly so. Really, Minerva, I'm fine, I'm going to be fine."

She crossed her arms, and Severus had to fight off an amused smirk.

"Well, you look like you need a few more hours of sleep before you can even attest to approaching 'fine.' I think we should go ahead and call in Poppy. You do know that your little house elf wouldn't let anyone into your room, even after we explained to him we just wanted to determine that you were alright?"

Dumbledore blinked, deciding he owed his little friend a few lemon drops. "He did? Well, I apologize for him. I'm sure he was merely doing what he felt was best and meant no offense."

Minerva huffed, seeing Albus was not at all sorry for what Socky had done.

"Well, shall I call Poppy?"

Albus nodded, pushing the chair from the desk with a barely hidden grimace.

"Do you need assistance, Headmaster?" Severus asked, his trained eyes vigilantly watching his mentor's careful movements.

Severus ignored the curious look Minerva was giving him and forced himself not to react to or acknowledge Albus' suddenly touched expression.

"Yes, thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said after a moment, slowly rising from his chair.

Severus gracefully moved around the desk and came to his side.

Thankfully, Severus didn't need to provide much assistance, though the Headmaster did experience a short pass of dizziness on his way out of the office.

"I am curious, Severus," Dumbledore said as they approached his room. "Who is

Remus going to receive the blood transfusion from? Is there another here besides myself and Harry who has been exposed to this white magic to have gained what you say it has given me — immunity?"

Severus looked away, thinking quickly. "Actually, Headmaster . . . I had . . . hoped you would be the donor. . . ."

Dumbledore stopped, placing a hand on the wall to keep himself steady as he stared at his potions master.

"Me? But as I understand it, there are blood types that must be taken into account. I don't know a great deal about human blood, but know that much. What makes you think Remus' system would accept my blood?"

Severus embraced his acting ability and managed a flush. "Headmaster. . . ." He stopped, purposely making it seem as if he was truly ashamed of himself.

"Severus, is there . . . something you wish to tell me?" Albus asked cautiously.

"I created a spell a while back. At the time it was more of an ego thing, to see if I could do it."

It wasn't a lie. To Severus it was a while back . . . in the future. The spell had become a necessity. With the war, sometimes they had to resort to muggle methods of healing, and when someone had suffered an injury, and Blood Replenishing Potions were scarce, well . . . they had to turn to each other for help directly.

"A spell?"

"It tells me the blood type of people."

Dumbledore cocked an eyebrow. "And?"

"Well, I tested it on myself first and verified the spell worked. I'm A-negative."

"And I gather you later cast it on me without my knowledge?" Dumbledore continued. His voice wasn't angry or accusing, it was actually amused.

"I am sorry, Headmaster."

Albus waved him off. "No harm was done, Severus. So? What is my blood type?" he asked, walking again.

"O-negative."

"And Remus?"

"B-positive."

"And I can give him blood?"

"Actually, Headmaster, you're a universal donor. You can give to everyone. In the muggle world, they would pay you a great deal to donate every other month."

Dumbledore blinked. "Interesting."

O o O o O

11:30

Harry was enjoying the first day back at Hogwarts, oblivious to the chaos currently going on in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, and at the Ministry. The only thing Harry noticed was the fact the Headmaster had missed breakfast that morning, but he put it off as the man being busy. He was the Chief Warlock, Headmaster, Supreme Wugwump, and all of that, after all.

Dobby was ecstatic about being with Harry at Hogwarts and glowed with pride in his new uniform. Harry was happy to see Dobby cheerful and continued to treat him as a friend rather than a servant, though he did take Professor Snape's advice and give Dobby things to do.

He had already spent most of his morning in the library, reading up on healing magic and the medicine the wizarding world knew. However, so far, like the other books he had read earlier with Neville, he was disappointed. There was barely anything showing how things actually *worked* in the human body. It was quite frustrating, to be honest, but he would keep looking. He had only just started searching the school library after all, but even if he didn't find anything, he swore to himself that he would do some serious research that summer to get some helpful information, albeit that be from a muggle medical book or personally from a muggle doctor.

Harry sighed, closing the book he had been reading.

It was strange. He had never really cared much about reading up on things and doing research, as he never really had a reason to. But this. . . .

The desire to help his best friend obtain something he could never have was like an unending fuel, a drive, a push he had never had before. Sure, there was the desire he had to reach his full potential and overcome the lock Professor Snape said he

had, but this was different.

He had lost his parents, and Neville, in a way, had lost his. But not permanently, or at least that's what Harry told himself. He was confident he could provide something that would not only change the life of his friend, but restore the life of two individuals who were just like his parents.

In Harry's mind, if he succeeded in restoring the Longbottoms, he would be bringing honor to his parents' sacrifice. But it was more than that. It would be a verification. An affirmation to himself.

Purpose.

After the chat he had had with Severus, his thoughts occasionally strayed to purpose, and the likelihood that Voldemort had never chosen or found one. Harry was afraid he would fall into that, and doom himself to a life of mistakes or pointlessness.

A part of himself knew he was being silly. That he was young and had years to live before he even needed to bother with such thoughts, but he couldn't deny the fear he felt when he wondered if Voldemort had ever been like him, more than merely being a parselmouth.

Professor Snape had said Voldemort had gone to Hogwarts, so that meant he had been sorted and had sat through classes, just like him. It meant he had slept in the dormitories, visited the library, wandered the grounds, and done all of the other things a student did.

Harry wondered if Voldemort had ever sat at the table he was at now.

It was an odd feeling, knowing the monster who had murdered your parents and had attempted to murder you had gone to the same school you were now attending.

When had things gone wrong? When had something snapped in him, making him Voldemort, or had he always been so crooked?

Harry wasn't sure he ever wanted to know the answer.

O o O o O

Remus glanced at the entrance of the library. He had been told by a house elf that Harry was in the library, no doubt seeking something to do as he waited for classes to begin again. Remus straightened, calling forth his Gryffindor courage, and entered

the library.

Remus was nervous. He honestly didn't know what to say to the kid. The boy was amazing, and he truly felt awed to be one of his teachers.

Remus perused the shelves, trying to make it appear he was in there for a book, rather than to get to know the son of a lost best friend. Remus' eyes scanned the library, quickly finding the black haired boy in the far corner, surrounded by thick books.

Shaking his head, amused and slightly saddened as he recalled how often Lily was in a similar position, he quietly approached.

As Remus came closer, keeping his eyes mostly on the bindings along the shelves, he took note of how Harry's head rose from the pages and turned his way.

He must have felt my presence, Remus reasoned. *I should have predicted that.*

Remus turned and looked at him, deciding to give up his 'stealthy' approach.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," he said, deciding a professor greeting a student wasn't abnormal.

"Hello, Professor," Harry returned, shifting himself forward to sit up straighter.

Remus took that moment to scan the books sprawled out around Harry. He blinked at what he found. These were pretty advanced healing texts. What was Harry doing?

"Madam Pomfrey has you researching?" he asked, trying to determine why Harry would be looking into such things.

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm just reading up on a few things on my own, professor."

Remus took the initiative and sat down at the table, though he decided to keep an empty seat between them as he allowed his eyes to glide over the books' titles that were displayed at the top of the pages.

"These are pretty advanced, Harry. Do you need any help?"

Remus heard a few short hisses from Harry's sleeve, and it was clear Harry was thinking over what his familiar had just said to him.

"I'm not sure. I'm looking for a book to tell me how the body actually works, and I'm having trouble finding anything that will really go into detail," Harry said after a

moment. "Most of what I do find is too broad and only skims the surface."

"Hmm, well, I don't know much about healing magic, but I have had some experience with medicine in the muggle world. I doubt it'll be much help to you though." Remus cleared his voice when he saw Harry wasn't deterred in hearing him out. "I've spent some time in muggle London and have had the necessity to meet some doctors."

"Really?" Harry asked, perking up instantly.

Remus was a bit surprised by Harry's reaction, having assumed Harry had wanted to stay more on the magical aspect of treating others.

"Yes, I had an accident with an automobile one time, and . . . well, the muggles got to me first. Who knew their emergency services could react so fast? I suppose it's with their technology."

"Wow. Were you badly hurt?" he asked.

"Broken leg and a concussion. They zipped me to one of their hospitals, x-rayed me and did a dozen other tests on me to make sure I was okay. I assume you know what an x-ray machine is?"

Harry nodded.

"Very good. Well, once I woke, they showed me a few of the 'scans' they took of me. The detail was quite impressive, I must admit. Here in the wizarding world we don't have anything like that, granted, I suppose we don't really need it."

"So, these scans . . . were they of your head?"

Remus noted how Harry's eyes held an earnest glint at that question. Odd.

"They wanted to play it safe, so did a full body scan. They were concerned I could have serious internal injuries, due to the reports they heard from witnesses. Thankfully, my inner magic had stepped in and saved me from grievous harm, but they didn't know that."

Harry nodded, easily able to imagine such an occurrence. The magic of an adult wizard could save them from many things, impact being one of them. Another bonus to having a fully developed core.

"So, Harry, I hear you are quite the healer," he said with a smile, happy their

conversation was going so well.

Harry gave a small shy smile, but Remus could tell there was a healthy amount of pride behind it, as there should be.

"I like to help," Harry answered with a shrug, his humility coming through now.

Remus couldn't help but be reminded of Lily.

They sat in silence for a time, and Remus was finding it difficult deciding what to say next. He looked at Harry after glancing over the books again, and it was clear to Remus Harry didn't know what to say either, though Harry was able to find his voice first.

"You didn't come here to get a book, did you?" Harry asked.

"Well," Remus said, hesitating for a moment. "I'll be honest with you, Harry. No, I didn't come into the library today to find a book."

Harry couldn't help but raise a rather Snape-ish eyebrow at him as Remus breathed out, like what he had just said had been a lot to say.

"If you want me to heal you, I'll be happy to, you know," Harry blurted out suddenly, as Remus had yet to elaborate why he had come into the library.

Remus gave a start at that, before giving Harry a soft smile and shaking his head. "As much as I'd like for you to heal me, ironically, I must say, 'no thank you'. I have made arrangements with another to take care of my . . . uh, furry little problem. Though, I do have you to thank for the cure I will receive from Professor Snape."

Harry's eyes widened, not knowing anything about the possibility of there being an alternative cure, though, he did know they would be looking into the white magic to synthesize an antidote.

"Professor Snape? He's found a way to extract the white magic and use it on others?" Harry asked, stunned.

It had only been a day since the ICW meeting. The Potions Master was really something to find a cure so quickly. It certainly did explain why he and Professor Lupin hadn't been at breakfast. Perhaps this was another reason why the Headmaster had been gone?

"Perhaps, which is why I can't accept your offer. I've agreed to be the trial run for this

alternative method. If it works, we'll be able to begin eradicating Lycanthropy . . . possibly forever."

Harry blinked in confusion, trying to understand what that meant exactly, until his eyes widened. "A vaccine?"

"Your potions professor thinks so," Remus said softly.

"That's brilliant! When are they going to do it?" Harry asked.

"Well, Madam Pomfrey wants to wait for later this week because of," Remus cleared his throat before he continued. Harry noted that he did that a lot. "Because of the donor."

Remus didn't want to tell Harry about Dumbledore and others getting sick. He felt it would worry the boy unnecessarily, especially since most who had taken ill were beginning to recover.

"Donor?"

"Professor Snape believes the cure can be delivered through a blood transfusion because the white magic resides within the individual's blood cells as well as in their core."

Harry nodded in understanding. "That makes sense, because that's how the curse is too."

They fell into another moment of silence, before Remus broke it.

"I came in here today because I have been meaning to speak with you for some time now," Remus said, returning to the previous subject.

"Oh, what about, professor?"

"As ashamed as I am to admit it, I have been unsure of how to approach you, and not for the reason that you might think. You see, I'm . . . I was a close friend of your parents."

What Harry had been expecting had definitely not been that, and he didn't know what to say.

Remus smiled sadly. "I was in your parents' year and in Gryffindor with them. Your parents helped me a great deal, and I count myself blessed having known them."

"So, did they know?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"About my problem?"

Harry nodded, slightly embarrassed by his straightforwardness.

Remus laughed. "Oh yes, they definitely knew, but . . . how did you know I've had that problem for that long?"

Harry shrugged. "I can sense it. At the ICW, I was able to compare how it feels in people depending on how long it has been there. For you, you're not quite like Mr. McCaffrey, but you've had it for a long time."

Remus shook his head, surprised. "You're quite something, aren't you?"

Harry didn't have a reply for that, so didn't answer.

Remus sighed softly and looked at Harry with contemplative eyes. "Well, I just wanted you to know. So . . . if you have any questions about them, you have another person you can ask," he continued, hoping he wasn't being too painfully awkward.

Apparently not, as Harry smiled. "Thanks, professor."

Remus' heart soared. "No problem."

O o O o O

Harry came to the Hufflepuff table, looking forward to heading back to the library after lunch to perhaps find something to help Neville's parents, and maybe Remus would be there to talk to him more. He would see.

He sat down, glancing up at the head table. Professor Snape and Professor Lupin were present, as were most of the other teachers, but Madam Pomfrey was gone, as was the Headmaster.

Sitting down, he took a turkey sandwich from the dish across from him before a flutter of movement caught his eye. An owl. He looked up and watched as the unfamiliar owl landed in front of his plate and held out his leg in which a letter was attached. The few other people at the table looked his way, curious to see what Harry Potter had been given, and from whom.

Harry took the letter, oblivious to Professor Snape glancing his way as the owl flew off.

There was an official looking insignia on the front with the words: **International Confederation of Wizards.**

Curious, Harry ripped along the top of the envelope, the letter within magically rising up soon after.

With the letter in his hands, he felt a ripple of magic brush across his bare skin.

:Harry!:

Coral's alarmed hiss was the only warning he got before a deep throbbing voice boomed forth, releasing a powerful pulse that propelled him off the bench and onto his back.

"**HEAL *THIS***."

A pain he had never felt before seeped into his skin and sunk into the bones in his hands, a black, visible fire flickering across his skin.

He screamed, his magic lashing out and repelling the envelope away, but it was too late, the hex, curse, or whatever it was, had already entered him.

Coral landed limply on the floor by his side.

:Coral!:

She didn't answer.

Still on his back, shouting as tears rose in his eyes, he struggled with his hands, trying, desperately, to put out the dark flames that felt as if were boiling his bones.

O o O o O

Next part, *Assault*, is under construction.

Assault

Part 16: Assault

Severus bolted over the head table, never minding the plates that crashed to the floor as a result. He called his wand instantly to his hand as he charged toward Harry, not caring how furious and frightening he appeared. The students were screaming, horrified by what they were witnessing as Flitwick and a number of the other professors moved forward to usher the students out of the hall. All the while, Harry was crying out as his hands were being engulfed by a hideous black fire. But strangely, they weren't burning.

"Potter!"

Harry looked up, choking back a sob as the Potions Master kneeled beside him. Severus spotted Coral curled up by Harry's hip. He hoped she wasn't dead.

"Don't move!" Severus ordered, placing his left hand firmly on Harry's forehead as he immediately began waving his wand around Harry's flaming hands in quick circles. Severus didn't think of the time in the future where he hadn't been able to act in time to save a father from this very curse. Instead, he forced himself to focus on what he had to do in that moment.

Harry tried to keep as still as he could, tears now pouring from his eyes as raging pain continued to pulse within his hands, but he couldn't stop his trembling as he closed his eyes, biting his bottom lip so hard he drew blood.

Severus was quickly joined by Sprout and McGonagall. He hoped they wouldn't try to stop him. He needed to address this now. Waiting would endanger Harry's hands and arms, as well as his life. This was a ruthless curse, targeting the victim's bone marrow. If he didn't lift it in time, Harry's bones would be as frail as an old muggle's with severe osteoporosis, and that was if he was lucky.

"Severus?" McGonagall asked worriedly, coming to a stop behind him.

Snape didn't pause in his casting, his eyes darkening as he began moving his lips, muttering in a language none of the others there recognized. Severus was relieved when Minerva didn't interrupt him again.

Professor Sprout moved forward, about to lift Coral from the floor, but stopped before her fingers touched her scales. She pulled out her wand and waved it over Coral with a frown. She then gently levitated her up and placed her into a soft box

McGonagall had quickly conjured.

Harry's eyes opened slightly as Professor Sprout's hand came to rest on his shoulder.

Sweat speckling his brow, Severus focused his magic, blanketing Harry's hands with gentle magic as he finally managed to extinguish the black fire and remove the curse.

Harry released a deep, throaty sigh of relief.

"Don't move your hands or put any strain on them, Potter. They are extremely weak," Severus warned.

"Coral?" Harry asked, his voice cracking.

Severus looked to Pomona, who was holding the box with Coral. Pomona slowly held the box out for Severus to take.

Harry slowly sat up with the help of Sprout, earnestly looking at Professor Snape.

Severus waved his wand over Coral, afraid of what he would find. Getting back the readings, he couldn't help but frown.

"Professor?" Harry asked, his eyes now tearing up from a deeper sort of pain. Was Coral dead?

"I am not sure, Potter. She's alive, but . . . I am not getting any other reading than that. Something is blocking my magic."

Just then, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Lupin came into the hall. Evidently, Remus had immediately dashed off to get Pomfrey who had been in the Headmaster's quarters.

"What's happened?" Pomfrey asked, pulling her wand out.

Severus rose, Harry remaining on the floor with Professor Sprout, his hands limp in his lap, bearing no marks of the fire he had just endured. The damage was within.

"Someone sent a cursed letter to Mr. Potter under the guise of postage from the ICW," Severus answered, to the horror of Pomfrey and Remus. "I have dealt with the curse, but I am afraid I was unable to prevent Potter from being harmed."

"What was the curse?" she asked.

Severus didn't answer at first, knowing this curse was not well known and that Madam Pomfrey and the others had probably never even heard of it. Admitting he had knowledge of the spell would look suspicious; though, his ability to counter it was as well, but he could put that off as him being knowledgeable enough in the Dark Arts to combat it that way.

It was a curse that became known and feared later in the future war. The Bone Eater. Voldemort used it as a torturing spell to extract information the 'fun' way. The Order never learned where Voldemort had discovered it, but he began using it just months after he had overtaken the Ministry. Severus suspected it had been held within the Forbidden Library, which was within the bowels of the Ministry's basement.

Severus fought back a shiver before focusing on Pomfrey again.

"I don't know," Severus lied.

Pomfrey frowned, before levitating Harry up and carefully touching his arm and getting him to lie back down. "Let's get you to the infirmary."

Harry closed his eyes in reply.

O o O o O

Severus brushed his sleeve against his forehead as he worked. He had been able to convince Pomfrey that this was the best course of action to take to ensure Harry fully regained the use of his hands. Simply vanishing his hand bones and giving him skele-grow was definitely the worse thing they could do in this situation, as he had discovered in the future. Of course, he couldn't explain that to Pomfrey, who questioned his reasoning in stopping her from casting the bone-removal spell, but his stern gaze had done the trick and she admitted the process would be extremely painful for Harry to have to endure on top of what he had already.

Although she would never know, he was eternally grateful that she had not pressed him further and had, instead, taken him at his word that carrying out her initial plan of treatment would not be wise.

Severus sighed, his thoughts going to the future he had experienced with Harry. . . .

"It was risky, but we got him," Mad-Eye said.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Molly cried, grateful before becoming worried once more. "How is he? How hurt is he?"

Remus stepped forward as Mad-Eye's good eye looked at her with a trace of pity, while his other eye swiveled around and looked toward the room her husband was currently in.

"I'm not a healer, Molly, but . . . it's serious," Remus said.

"Will my husband live?"

"He was cursed with something new, Molly. Severus managed to stop it soon after we got him out of there, but that's the most we've been able to do at the moment," Mad-Eye said gruffly.

Molly was about to ask something else but was suddenly interrupted by screams echoing out of Arthur's room, people shouting urgently at one another from within.

Severus dashed forward, nearly knocking Remus to the floor as he rushed past him. He entered the room, the door slamming closed behind him.

"What happened? !" Severus demanded.

"We attempted to vanish the bones in his hand, so we could begin the vanish-and-skele-grow treatment, as discussed, but then . . . then. . . ." the young healer was at a loss.

"Get out of my way," Severus stated, forcing his way to Arthur's side.

What he found horrified him. The black flames that he had believed he had been able to completely extinguish when Arthur had arrived had flared back to life, and it was clear by the collapsed state of the man's unblemished hand and wrist that the bones there had been completely destroyed. However, that was not what was scaring him.

The curse seemed to have mutated. Only later did they learn that the curse's residue often reawakened and mutated when exposed to magic affecting bones or cartilage. It had taken Severus several months to develop a potion that could bypass the curse's trap and treat the unfortunate victim — as even skele-grow would trigger the curse again.

Before, when he had extinguished the flames on Arthur, he had succeeded in stopping the progression of the curse, but like all curses, when dispelled or lifted, they leave a residue, a fingerprint. It often takes time for spell residue to disappear completely. Spell and curse residue is not like white magic, as white magic is from the lycanthropy curse being utterly destroyed.

"What should we do? !" another healer cried as the black fire began moving up Arthur's arm at an alarming rate, consuming Arthur's bones as it went.

Arthur was beyond expressing pain. He was just lying there with his eyes tightly closed and his mouth partly open in a silent scream.

Severus looked at the man's neck and chest. If the curse reached him there, there would be no hope.

Waving his wand over the flames as he had done before to extinguish them, Severus' eyes widened as his efforts did absolutely nothing.

He was running out of time. In a matter of seconds, Arthur's chest would be overtaken, and the man would suffocate from lack of internal support.

"Forgive me, Arthur, but I have no choice," Severus said.

Severus amputated his arm at the shoulder, inches above where the flames were, before instantly cauterizing the wound.

It was all for naught though.

A second after they thought the crisis was over, the black flame ignited again. There was nothing any of them could do then.

Arthur Weasley succumbed to the curse that very hour.

Severus continued to stir, telling himself Harry would not suffer that fate. He had extinguished the flames and had done his best to remove as much curse residue as he could from Harry, having done it a handful of times for others after the experience with Arthur. It was possible that Madam Pomfrey could have carried out her skele-grow treatment because of his efforts in clearing the residue, but Severus hadn't wanted to risk it, and he was sure, if Pomfrey knew what he did, she wouldn't have wanted to either.

Taking a pinch of salt, and grateful he hadn't been the one to have to tell the Headmaster what had happened, he sprinkled it over the nearly finished potion, confident that once Harry had used it, he would make a full recovery, eventually.

O o O o O

Harry woke to his hands up to his elbows in blue goo.

He was reclined back a bit, with his arms by his sides resting in two, long, cushioned

pans filled to the rim with a smelly blue mixture. He quickly found he could not move his hands or arms at all and felt magic seeping from the cool liquid into his flesh to sink deep into his bones. It was rather soothing, to be honest, albeit strange.

Looking around, he found he was in the infirmary but curtained off from the rest of it. He supposed it was for privacy. He didn't know where Coral was, but before he could really think of what to do next, he heard voices from the other side of the drapes.

"How is he?"

Harry wasn't positive, but it sounded like Professor McGonagall.

"I just checked on him and he was asleep," Madam Pomfrey answered. McGonagall gave a soft sigh as Pomfrey continued. "I can't believe this managed to happen. Something like that getting through the wards shouldn't be possible, should it?"

"No, but you and I both know the wards are not foolproof. It is hard to run a school with impervious wards. Students bring in a lot of things, and keying all of the harmless things in to prevent a few harmful ones. . . . It just isn't practical."

"But surely the wards should have detected—"

"You're right. It should have detected the curse. The Unspeakables are examining the envelope right now. Albus called in a personal favor and sent it to them to examine. Perhaps the answer lies there, and with any luck they will be able to track it back to the monster who did this," McGonagall said viciously before calming her voice down. "It was very fortunate Severus knew what to do. I do not want to imagine what would have happened to Harry if he hadn't. . . ."

"Yes, but there is . . . I don't know." Pomfrey paused, uncertain.

"What, Poppy?"

"It's just strange. Severus I mean. He knew exactly what to do, Minerva. Exactly. He even stepped in and stopped me from treating Harry once we got him settled into bed."

"What do you mean?" McGonagall asked, confused.

"I was planning on vanishing the damaged bones in Harry's hands so he could regrow them properly with Skele-grow. You should have seen the way Severus looked at me when I questioned him when he stopped me. It was frightening, Minerva. I don't care what he says, he knows what this curse was and knew what

would happen if it wasn't handled in a certain way."

"Poppy, we both know Severus has a rather dark past. Perhaps he learned about it there?"

"Then why hadn't You-Know-Who used it? Surely he would have used this if he had known about it. I believe we both agree it is a rather frightening spell, and very meticulous in how it attacks the body."

"What are you suggesting, Poppy?"

"Severus knew exactly what to do — as if he knew the spell inside and out. If he really didn't know what the spell was, how was he able to lift it from Harry so quickly and thoroughly? The man even knew how to remove the spell residue from Harry, and he had almost gotten every bit of it too. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he was able to help Harry, but it's . . . suspicious."

"Are you saying he's responsible for the letter coming to Harry?" McGonagall questioned, appalled by the very idea.

"Good Merlin, no! But, what I am saying is . . . what if he had been the creator of the curse? You and I both know Severus is very gifted in spell creation. This would not be the first spell of his that had fallen in the wrong hands. . . ."

There was a long pause.

"Severus is different. He's not the same as he was last year," Poppy said softly, breaking the silence.

"I know what you mean. I never would have imagined him taking James' son under his wing, especially with how he spoke earlier in the summer."

"I don't know what to think about it."

"I've spoken to Albus about his changed personality. He assures me Severus is Severus, and that he should be trusted implicitly. I wish I knew why he was so confident," McGonagall confided.

"As do I, but I trust the Headmaster. He must have his reasons," Pomfrey said.

"Yes, he always does. Well, if you need me, I'll be in my office. I have a few last minute things to take care of to prepare for classes next week; though, with what's happened, I may just wait to do them this weekend."

"Well, if you are, could you go check on the Headmaster? When I left him, he had become slightly feverish."

"He hasn't begun getting dizzy again, has he?"

"I don't believe so, but just the same, I'd like to know from a source other than him that he is truly feeling alright. We don't really understand what is going on with this white magic yet. Perhaps it is as Severus says, but then, perhaps it's not. We can't be too careful. Recent events have shown us that much."

"Agreed."

With that, Harry heard McGonagall leave and Pomfrey enter her office.

What exactly had he just overheard?

He wasn't sure, and decided to think on it later. Right then, he wanted to know where Coral was.

"Dobby?" Harry whispered, hoping Pomfrey wouldn't hear him or Dobby's arrival.

-Pop-

"Master?" Dobby asked, his voice quavering and his eyes wide with worry.

"Please stay quiet, Dobby. I don't want anyone else to know I'm awake yet."

Dobby nodded. "How is master? Dobby heard what happened, but Dobby couldn't do anything to help. Dobby is sorry he hadn't stopped the letter. Dobby should have checked. Dobby is sorry he failed master!" he cried quietly.

"Shh, Dobby, you didn't know. You didn't fail me. Please don't cry."

Harry was beginning to wonder if calling Dobby had been a good idea.

Dobby sniffled, collecting himself. "What can Dobby do to help master?"

"Do you know where Coral is?" Harry held his breath, waiting for Dobby to answer.

:Harry?: a groggy Coral interrupted.

:Coral! Where are you?:

:Beside the bed, on the side table:

Harry turned head as far as he could. Who knew having one's arms pinned would constrict one's motions so much?

Sure enough, there was a box on the table, though he couldn't see into it.

:Are you okay?: he asked, his voice thick with emotion.

:Just tired. I overheard the potions master talking with the headmaster when you were asleep. Evidently it was you who saved me. Your magic pulsed at the last moment, and because I had been filled with your magic, it blocked everything else. Knocked me out in the process though: Coral explained.

Harry gave a short, relieved laugh before looking to Dobby. "Can you get Coral for me?"

"Of course, Master," Dobby said happily, pointing at Coral and causing her to levitate up before lowering her on Harry's chest.

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, trying to keep himself from becoming too emotional. It was such a relief to know she was really alright. He had been afraid she had died.

:I'm glad you're alright, Coral: he said.

:And I, you: she answered, before coiling up at the center of his chest, right at his sternum.

Harry smiled and closed his eyes, falling back to sleep as Dobby stood watch.

O o O o O

"You wanted to see me, Headmaster?" Severus asked, entering the office.

It had been less than twenty four hours since Harry had been cursed, and in two days the students would be back from break. Harry was still in the infirmary, his arms still soaking in the blue goo.

Dumbledore nodded, motioning to the chair across his desk. Severus noted he had not been offered a lemon drop. This did not bode well.

"I just finished speaking with the Unspeakables," Albus said, the blue in his eyes like a turbulent ocean.

"Oh?"

"The envelope was made of Manx parchment."

"Manx parchment? I don't know much about it, but I thought no more existed," Severus asked, frowning.

"As did I. Manx parchment was made illegal over three hundred years ago, but because it continued to be made illegally and used for dark purposes, as we have recently experienced ourselves, it was deemed necessary to destroy the source of Manx parchment in the early 1800's.

"Manx cattle were completely wiped out by wizard kind because of the properties of their skin which was used to produce Manx parchment. Their skin was impervious to magic, because it ebbed a sort of 'anti-magic' field. I'm not too clear on the particulars myself, but remember as a child hearing people talking about the dangers of it. It could pass through any ward, because the ward would fail to recognize it even being there."

Severus' eyes widened.

"I see you understand. Anything placed within the sealed envelope cannot be detected by wards or other magical means. It can be used as a path through all magical defenses."

Severus didn't know what to say. This was very troubling, particularly since Marx parchment had not been used in the future, at least to his knowledge. Though, there were a few unexplained deaths when the war was just beginning. Perhaps Voldemort had used the parchment to quickly remove those he believed would grow to become a problem for him, such as Amos Diggory and a few Wizengamot members. Their deaths had never been solved. But then, Severus had no real reason to assume the Dark Lord had actually obtained and used Marx parchment in the future. It did make him wonder though.

Severus shook himself from his thoughts, but they must have shown on his face as he met Dumbledore's contemplative eyes. He quickly decided to speak before the Headmaster could enquire about what he was thinking about.

"I haven't heard of anything like this being circulated in Knockturn Alley or the other less known routes of the black market. So this was likely stored by someone who has the means to preserve it in secret, unless the person responsible obtained it outside of Europe."

Dumbledore nodded. "I have come to the same conclusion, but it unfortunately doesn't get us much closer to the one responsible."

"Were the Unspeakables able to determine anything else?"

"The Manx parchment used to make the envelope was at least 190 years old. They can't determine the exact age because of the material's magical properties, of course, but they were able to determine that much. As for the ICW seal on it, it was forged. Though for what purpose, I do not know. It is highly unlikely they expected us to believe the forgery and blame the ICW."

"Mockery, then," Severus suggested.

"Possibly," Dumbledore agreed, before shifting the conversation. "Cornelius is very eager to get to the bottom of this, and has taken a . . . curious stance on it. He has taken my advice and has entrusted the full investigation completely to Madam Bones, who has agreed to work with the Unspeakables. It is doubtful they will be able to trace the envelope or the letter back to the perpetrator, or perpetrators, but if there is anything that can be discovered, I'm sure they will find it."

Severus nodded, knowing from the future that Madam Bones knew how to get things done. Even in dire circumstances.

"On a different subject, Madam Bones has told me she has contacted a few healers from St. Mungos who have agreed to oversee the blood transfusion with Remus and I next weekend. She and I both agreed we should continue moving forward with the lycanthropy cure, despite recent events."

"I agree, Headmaster. Has Madam Pomfrey cleared you for it?"

"Grudgingly, but yes. I seem to have fully recovered from the white magic entering my core and system. I don't feel any different than before I had it, but if I really concentrate, I can feel it. It's a rather peculiar feeling."

Severus blinked, wondering what that really meant. Though, Albus was more in tune with his magic than most people. It made sense that he would be aware of it when he focused.

"I checked on Harry last night while he was sleeping. What is the treatment you have him on? I asked Madam Pomfrey, but she said it was your plan of action, not hers," Dumbledore asked after a moment.

Severus kept his expression neutral, convincing himself he had nothing to hide here.

"Has Madam Pomfrey told you the extent of Mr. Potter's injuries?"

"Not in detail. To be honest, I sensed that she did not want to repeat them, even to herself," Dumbledore admitted.

Severus wasn't surprised with that bit of news.

"Potter's hand bones suffered extensive damage, losing over ninety percent of the bone marrow, nearly all of the cartilage, and twenty five percent of compact bone. The curse had unfortunately branched up into his wrists and slightly into his radius and ulna bones, but did not have the opportunity to cause the same amount of damage it had to his hands."

"No doubt we have you to thank for that," his mentor said softly, his eyes holding a tenderness Severus couldn't look away from, no matter how much he wished to.

Severus swallowed. "I just reacted." He didn't want to explain himself, and hoped the short reply would suffice. It seemed to, for the moment.

"And the potion? I am not familiar with it. Did you create it?"

"Yes, Headmaster. Once I determined the state of Potter's injuries, I was able to brew a potion specifically targeted to treat them — to rebuild his bones from the inside out, using the existing bone as a foundation rather than starting from scratch as skele-grow does. I believe this treatment, though more time consuming than skele-grow, is better in the long run."

"I imagine brewing such a potion is rather complicated work, let alone creating it," Dumbledore appraised. "And carrying it out in the few hours you did it in, quite an achievement, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Time was of the essence. The longer Potter went without treatment, the higher the chance he would worsen his injury. As it is, his recovery will take quite some time, and until his bones have completely mended, they will be vulnerable. I created the potion out of necessity, nothing more."

"Nothing more?" Dumbledore's old but strong voice was gentle, though there was an accusing tone laced within, as if he didn't believe him. "Severus, despite what some people may say, I am no fool. You care for the boy, and though it may have begun out of a sense of duty or a debt you felt you owed to Lily, it isn't anymore. You don't need to hide the truth from me."

Severus broke eye contact, his mentor's words hitting deeper than Albus could ever know.

The truth. Severus closed his eyes for a long moment, centering himself.

Before now, he had been certain he had carried himself in a way to make it appear he was only watching over Harry and guiding him to honor the memory of Lily and ensure her son would grow to become all he could be, but now it seemed those excuses, no matter how basically true they were, had been stripped away.

Dumbledore had come to the heart of it.

"Is it so hard to acknowledge, Severus?"

Severus didn't answer, trying to figure out what he should do to move the conversation away from this, before he said something he would regret.

"Severus, I must admit, you have worried me these past few months. At times, you are completely yourself, or at least the self you wish others to believe you are. And then, at other times, you are . . . not."

Severus slowly looked up at that, wishing he had seen this coming so he would have been better prepared.

"I don't know what to tell you, Headmaster," he said truthfully.

Dumbledore sighed, as if pained by his potions master's apparent struggle with feelings.

Severus couldn't believe this was happening. Of course, he should have known something like this would happen eventually. In the future, Albus had felt it necessary to get, well, a bit mushy, at times. There were really no other words to describe it. His mentor, one of the most powerful wizards of the century, if not millennium, was a softy, and sometimes wanted to share the fluffiness, especially when things became dire.

Severus closed his eyes and couldn't help but release an exasperated breath.

What should he do?

"Headmaster, as much as I appreciate your concern for me, there is nothing to talk about," he began, only to realize that was probably the last thing he should have said if he wanted to end the predicament he was currently in.

"Very well, Severus. If you do not wish to discuss it, I will let the matter drop," he said, apparently deciding to take pity on him. Severus was grateful, but knew not to

count himself lucky just yet. "However, I just want you to know that it is alright to allow yourself to care for someone again. I dare say Harry will need someone — what do muggles say? — oh, yes, 'in his corner', as you clearly are."

Well, that wasn't as painful as he had expected.

O o O o O

Remus entered the infirmary, not knowing what to expect. He had spoken with Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout, of course, but there was a difference between being told about it and seeing it for himself.

"Thanks, Dobby," he heard Harry say from the other side of the curtain.

"Dobby is happy to help kind and great master!" Dobby answered as Remus pulled the curtain open a bit and peeked in.

"I hope this is a good time?" Remus asked, finding his old friend's son sitting in bed with his hands and arms soaking in the blue concoction created by Severus Snape.

Dobby was by Harry's bedside, levitating a book out in front him and Coral was resting on top of his head.

"Oh, not at all, professor," Harry said quickly. Remus was fairly certain the boy was bored.

Remus smiled and took a seat on the empty chair beside Harry's bed. "Been keeping busy, I see," he said, motioning to the still hovering book.

Harry shrugged, though it was constrained by the spells keeping his arms still. "Can't really do anything else," he said, glancing down at his arms.

"How long will you need to stay here?" Remus asked.

"Madam Pomfrey wants me to stay for another two days, but Professor Snape says I may be able to leave by the time the rest of the students arrive; though, I'll still need to have my arms covered in this . . . potion. But I would have to anyway even if I stay as long as Pomfrey wants me to. I'm not sure what Professor Snape has in mind to keep my arms covered in this stuff while I attend classes, but I'll do whatever he says. I don't want to be stuck in bed any longer than I have to."

"You need this potion for that long?" Remus asked, unable to keep surprise from seeping in his voice.

"Yes, sir. Professor Snape said that what that curse removed in seconds will take days, if not weeks, to regain."

"What about skele-grow? That only takes twenty-four hours to regrow the bones of an entire limb."

"I guess it conflicts with the residue left over from the curse. Dobby said Professor Snape was quite clear in stating I shouldn't be given skele-grow."

"I see. Well, Professor Snape is the expert on those kinds of things."

Harry nodded, though his eyes held a question.

"You look confused, Harry. Is there something you want to ask?"

Harry began to shake his head no, but then he hesitated. "Well, it's — it's not really my business."

"There's no harm in asking, Harry. If it's too personal, I could just tell you and leave it at that."

"Okay. Well, I sort of overheard Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey talking yesterday. They said some strange things . . . mostly about Professor Snape."

"Ah. I think I understand your hesitancy now. What did they say about him?"

"How he's different, how strange it is that he was able to overcome the curse as he had, and that sort of thing. I had just been waking up, but I specifically remember one of them pointing out that he has a dark past. I don't know, it was strange, and it made me curious. What sort of dark past did he have?"

"Harry, I'm not sure if I should really say anything, but I see that you have been thinking on this a great deal, so I'll just say what is a matter of public record. In the last war, Professor Snape had been a spy for the light. He gave information to Dumbledore who was then able to help others with it. There was more to it than that, obviously, but the important thing is, though Professor Snape has a rather dark past, he redeemed himself in doing what very few others could."

Harry's eyes were wide. "So, a lot of the dark things he knows came from his experience in pretending to be bad?"

Remus sighed, not wanting to lie, but finding it difficult to tell Harry the whole truth.

"Nobody is perfect, Harry. Everyone has made mistakes, done things they regret,

and Professor Snape is not exempt from this. Don't ever forget that. But also know that people can grow beyond their mistakes and become a person who should be respected. Can you promise me to remember that?"

Harry nodded.

Remus had certainly given him a great deal to think on.

O o O o O

Albus closed his eyes when Severus left his office.

He wished he could see what was going on in the mind of his former student, but couldn't; though, even if he could, he had more important issues to focus on. Like how to protect Harry from something that could get through wards and from someone with a frightening grasp on dark magic.

Suddenly, his fireplace flared green, alerting him to a firecall.

"Headmaster?"

"Ah, Anna," he said, getting up and finding the Unspeakable's face in the flames.

"I found it. May I come through?" she asked.

"Of course."

A moment later, she, who was much shorter than him, was standing in his office.

"It took me a bit to find it, but, as I had said before, I was certain it was in the Forbidden Library," she said, before Dumbledore could even offer her a seat.

"Thank you for taking the time to get back with me so quickly," he said, pulling out the chair in front of his desk for her before taking his own seat.

"No problem. Well, I learned it was placed in the library 800 years ago. It's called 'Exosso' – also known as, 'The Bone Eater.' It is a very hideous curse. Though, originally, it was a rather helpful one. Cooks would use it to remove the bones from meat without having to cut into the meat. Granted, it was more of a show for onlookers to see the black flames dance over the meat than for practicality. However, a dark lord took hold of the spell and twisted it into what it is now. With what I've recently learned, I am amazed things are as you say. The fact is, Mr. Potter shouldn't already be recovering. You see, the curse has a booby trap, of sorts, that when exposed to certain magicks targeted toward bones, it reawakens, using that

cast spell or given magic as a fuel to continue attacking the victim. You say Severus Snape devised a way to begin healing Potter in spite of the curse's residue still being there?"

"Yes, though Madam Pomfrey stated Severus was able to remove much of the residue before Mr. Potter left the Great Hall."

Anna's eyes widened. "Impressive."

"Yes. Severus is quite skilled."

"My colleagues want to understand how he was able to brew the potion he has to rebuild Potter's bones," she stated after a moment.

"Hmm, well, I don't wish to trouble Severus further with inquiries; however, I'm sure I could provide you with a sample of the potion, if that would be acceptable instead?" Dumbledore suggested.

"I understand, and providing a sample is acceptable. Thank you, Headmaster."

Albus nodded, especially grateful that the Unspeakables often cared more about figuring out 'what', instead of 'how' or 'why'. Though, he supposed, in their line of work, it was often best not to pursue those things.

"Well, I must be getting back," Anna said.

"Of course. Thank you for your help, my dear."

"Any time."

O o O o O

"I've placed repelling charms on the slings, but you will still need to be careful," Severus said, helping Harry place his wrapped arms and hands in the two slings that went over his shoulders, around his neck, and crisscrossed on his back so his arms could comfortably and securely rest against his stomach.

"I understand, sir," Harry said, looking down at his covered hands. He knew if he looked in a mirror just then, it would look like he was cradling a baby. Well, anything to get out of the infirmary as a patient.

Madam Pomfrey had taken half an hour to carefully wrap each one of his fingers before wrapping his palms, wrists and forearms in the potion soaked bandages. After that, all of it had been coated in a weird paste to prevent the potion from drying and

to give the gauze strength to prevent his fingers and wrists from moving — a cast. She said Professor Snape wanted him to continue absorbing the potion through his skin during all hours of the day. Only in the mornings would there be a pause in that when they removed the old dressings and placed new ones.

Harry was thankful the potion prevented itching, otherwise he would go stir crazy. Even now, he was really missing moving his hands.

"I honestly don't know how long this will take, Potter," Snape said once he was finished. "But I trust your house elf will be there to assist you."

"Dobby will help master!" Dobby said confidently, looking quite dashing for a house elf in his uniform. "Dobby will carry his school things and set up his self-writing quill for notes and—"

"I appreciate your devotion to your master, Dobby," Professor Snape smoothly interrupted before looking back to Harry. "Dobby will be your hands for the time being. The other professors of course know of the situation and will adjust things accordingly. As for how you will eat without using your hands, the Headmaster has told me he has that taken care of. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir," he answered as Coral coiled around the upper part of his sling above his arms. She looked content and comfortable there. Severus was now very glad he had gone ahead and gotten her for Harry at Diagon Alley. She was clearly a priceless ally and comfort to Harry.

"One other thing. News of the attack on you was in yesterday's edition of the Daily Prophet. I didn't want you to be caught unawares."

"Thanks, professor."

"The students will arrive in the Great Hall in an hour. You may wish to begin heading over there now."

Harry nodded, carefully getting up from the bed and allowing his arms to shift a bit in the specialized slings. Confident they were secure, he gave a nod to Dobby, and they headed to the Great Hall.

O o O o O

Next part, *Distraction*, is under construction.

Altercation

A/N: Yes, I changed the title to this part and have bumped 'Distraction' to later.

Questions Concerning:

Coral's Ability to Understand English: Yes, Coral can understand English. I don't think that is an unreasonable trait, as Hedwig in canon apparently could understand English to deliver post to certain people. *Shrug* It is a minor detail, but I just wanted to clear that up.

Part 17: Altercation

"Here, master," Dobby said happily, swiftly placing the eating utensils Professor Sprout had given him for Harry to use on the table.

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, before sitting. Neville took the spot beside him a moment later.

It had been two days since the holiday break had ended, and Harry was understandably still adjusting to his current condition. His peers, for the most part, had been considerate and had not badgered him with annoying questions or extensive concern, but their silence could be equally as irksome. It was confusing. On the one hand, Harry was glad they were giving him space, but another part of him wished they would act differently. Normal, perhaps? Granted, he supposed if he were in their shoes, he would be curious, unnerved, and confused about him too.

On a happier note, Neville and Draco remained by his side and continued treating him the same, well, mostly. Not having the use of one's hands does make one have to rely on others to a certain extent, even when one has magic.

Harry looked down at his plate as the food appeared and Dobby immediately set to work, summoning spoonfuls of food onto his plate and servings of a bit of everything.

"Thanks, Dobby," he said automatically, before focusing his attention to his fork and knife.

Dumbledore had charmed them specifically to respond to his magic and will. Harry was especially grateful. The thought of being fed by someone at every meal time had not been appealing at all.

Concentrating on his intent, his fork and knife rose up, as if being held by two invisible hands, and began cutting his food. It had taken him a good ten minutes to

get the hang of it initially, but it was actually a rather natural thing and much easier than most would think. All one really had to do was imagine themselves using the eating utensils and the rest just came automatically.

Magic was so awesome.

"Ready for Transfigurations?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. Do you think we'll be taking more notes today?" he asked.

"Not sure," Neville answered.

"The Ravenclaws mentioned working with rocks and books," Susan put in.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "That sounds . . . interesting. Though, I suppose if you wanted to hide a book, turning it into a rock would give it a nice disguise, right?"

Susan and a few others nodded as they finished breakfast.

O o O o O

Minerva watched as the first year Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors took their seats. Harry entered with Dobby and Neville before taking a seat near the back.

She gave a quiet sigh.

His resilience was amazing. She could only imagine how frustrating it was to be unable to use one's hands, but the boy was taking it in stride, at least so far. Granted, having a devoted friend by his side who knew when to step in to help and when not to was quite a blessing.

She shook her head. Neville was truly Alice and Frank's son. Augusta was blind.

Stepping out from around her desk, she began class, discussing the mechanics of what they would be doing that day.

She glanced at Harry and Dobby. Dobby had already set out the self-writing quill and parchment, her words no doubt already being paraphrased and recorded for Harry's notes.

House elves very well may be the greatest asset to wizards, besides magic in general, of course. Even now, a dozen house elves were happily screening the incoming mail and ensuring nothing harmful would get through the wards to hurt anyone again. Albus had spoken to the house elves of Hogwarts and asked if any

would be willing to do the dangerous job. In the end, he had to arrange a schedule for all of them to take turns for the task, as they all wanted to help.

Well, at least they no longer needed to worry about the mail being used to hurt their students.

"Now, I would like you all to try transfiguring the books in front of you into rocks. Remember, visualization is key," she said, before walking around the room as they began their attempts.

Harry, of course, wouldn't be able to participate in this part of the lesson. For the moment, he would only be able to work on the pronunciation of the spell. Thankfully, for first years, their end of year tests were focused more on the knowledge of spells themselves rather than the ability to actually cast them.

Making her rounds around the room, she was pleased when Neville had managed to make the binding of his book 'crusty' looking. It was definitely a good indication that he was thinking in the right direction.

"Awesome, Neville, I can see the rocklike roughness," Harry said, happy for his friend.

Neville beamed before continuing his attempt.

Harry's hands and arms remained immobile, cradled in the double sling.

O o O o O

Severus entered his living room, planning on beginning the newest potions magazine he had just subscribed to. Unfortunately, just as he was about to recline back in his chair, the fireplace flared green.

Turning toward it, he found Lucius' face in the flames.

"Lucius," he greeted.

"I do hope I am not interrupting something that cannot wait," he began, though his voice wasn't quite apologetic.

"Not at all, though your fire-call is unexpected."

"Quite. May I step through? I have something I must speak to you about, and discussing it through the flames is not something I am overjoyed in doing."

"Of course, Lucius, you needn't ask," he said, deciding to be as inviting as possible.

Lucius' face disappeared, and a moment later he stepped through the flames. Severus motioned to the seat across from him beside the fireplace and Lucius took it without a word.

Curious, and privately a bit alarmed with the pureblood's sudden visit, Severus waited in silence, knowing Lucius would begin the conversation when he was ready.

"Severus, we are both respectable men."

"Yes, Lucius."

Where was this going?

"We know what is important and what is not."

Severus wasn't going to disagree with him, so nodded.

"I have become aware of certain . . . happenings within the Ministry."

"Happenings?"

"Whoever is responsible is actively avoiding me and attempting to remain completely hidden from everyone, but their subtle nuances are what caught my initial attention. I don't know who, so do not ask, but I am certain memory charms have been cast, and I would not be surprised if a few Imperios are involved as well. I do not know what they are up to exactly, but I have noticed a number of suspicious activities in a few departments. I do not believe the Ministry is involved in this. Heh — I doubt they even know anything is wrong — you know how pathetically easy it is to infiltrate them," he sneered before continuing. "Severus, there are powerful individuals poking around the Ministry who are attempting to kill the Potter boy; recent events have made that clear to me."

Severus frowned, wondering what Lucius expected him to do with this information. He was sure the man would not lie to him, not like this anyway.

"It must seem strange — me coming to you and telling you these things. The fact is, you and I are alike. We are bound to the boy with a life debt — yours through his father, and mine through my son. Few know of your debt to Potter, but for me . . . everyone knows. It is why these people have been sneaking around me. They know if I learn of their plans I will be obligated to act. They know I will not damn my family with the fury of old magic and ignore their aggressions to the one who saved my heir

— boy-who-lived or not."

"I understand," Severus said, quickly deciding on a course of action. "Do you know what departments they have been focusing in? Anything specific?"

"Primarily research, specifically in the Forbidden Library. I don't have proof, but my suspicions lead to that forsaken place. There have been a few odd occurrences that would have been overlooked by most, but seemed a bit too out of place to me."

Well, if what Lucius was saying was true, it explained where they had gotten the curse. They had used the library, which also meant they had had access to all the other spells there. That did not bode well.

"Do you know how much access they exploited?" Severus asked.

"If my instinct is right, they accumulated roughly an hour in that place through means of having unsuspecting people do it for them. They are very good at what they do, Severus. Even if I had access to the logs for that place, I wouldn't be able to obtain proof that something untowardly was going on."

"What makes you think this activity is involved with the recent attack on Potter?"

"Really, Severus, the timing alone is reason to strongly suspect, particularly considering the ruthlessness of the curse, but the fact that they are trying to hide their actions from me should be enough of an indication." Lucius leaned back, his eyes growing dangerous. "You know I am not a stickler for the law, and if someone has a score to settle with someone, even if it involves using dark magicks, I won't report them. If anything, I will point them to a better source of materials; but with this debt I would not be able to do the same if I learned it involved Potter, no matter how much I loath to admit it. And they know this."

"I see. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will do what I can to assist in your obligation. As you said, I am burdened by it as well. Perhaps we can aid one another in the troublesome thing."

Lucius smiled. "I knew I was right in coming to you, Severus. You understand what is at stake. You know what is more important."

Severus bowed his head in agreement and in respectful dismissal.

He had much to do.

O o O o O

"You need help, Harry?" Neville asked him the next day as they got ready.

Harry would need to make a stop at the infirmary to switch out his casts and potion-soaked bandages before heading to breakfast, but thanks to the last few days of practice, it would only take fifteen minutes.

"No, Dobby has it. Thanks though," Harry said, sitting down on the edge of the bed as Dobby knelt at his feet to help him put on his shoes.

"You know, I don't get why you just don't heal yourself. You heal everyone else. If you're such a miracle worker, why not heal yourself — or do you like the attention? It's obvious that you like being served by the house elf," Smith stated coldly, gathering his things as he sent Harry a disgusted sneer.

"Lay off, will yuh?" Justin said as Harry turned his head toward Smith.

"If you must know, Smith, since the heart of your question is a reasonable one," he said, deciding to ignore the boy's hostility and obnoxious accusation, "Professor Snape told me not to. Not every bit of the curse is gone. If my magic touched the residue of the curse while it tried to heal my hands, it actually might reawaken the curse and the curse would use my magic as fuel, which would make it that much harder to stop. Madam Pomfrey agrees with Professor Snape." Harry looked down at his wrapped hands.

Professor Snape had roughly compared the curse to fire when explaining it to him. For fire to exist, it had to have three things: heat, oxygen, and fuel (something to burn). The curse was much the same way. It had to have enough of itself to act as 'heat', enough bone to act as 'oxygen', and magic to act as fuel. The initial fuel came from the magic the caster had put into the spell, but after that, it used the victim's.

It was disturbing to learn that it had not only been bone that had been burning away when he had been cursed, the innate magic in his hands had been being consumed as well, used in the horrible magical reaction. Thankfully, Professor Snape assured him the lost magic wasn't an issue.

Harry looked back up at Smith. "So I won't try to heal myself because it's safer this way, even if it may take weeks to get over it."

"Pfft, whatever," Smith said, before leaving.

"He's a right arse, isn't he?" Ernie stated, shaking his head.

"He has issues, that much is obvious," Justin agreed.

Harry just sighed, wishing Smith would stop acting like a jerk and leave him be. Every day it was pretty much the same with Smith. Snude remarks, hateful glares, sneers, and the like. It was really getting old, to be honest. But he wasn't doing anything else that could really be taken to a professor. He was just being a prick. Telling a teacher at this point wouldn't help things, if anything, it would only make Smith even more hostile.

Well, Harry decided, Smith just better keep things as they were and not escalate them. He wasn't sure what Dobby would do if Smith tried to pull something, but it probably wouldn't be pretty. Dobby was quite protective. And as for Coral, she had already told him she would bite him if given the chance.

Harry didn't ask if it would be a bite with or without venom, but hoped he would never have to find out, for Smith's sake.

Classes that day went as he had expected, as did the others that week. Much of it was listening while his self-writing quill took notes, but it actually wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. The only boring part of classes involved having to watch everyone do things, like cast spells and the like. Herbology was probably the worst in that regard, as most of it was working with one's hands.

Often times, Harry found himself having to remind himself that his condition wouldn't be forever.

O o O o O

"Thanks for letting me be here, professor," Harry said to the potions master.

They were in the infirmary with the Headmaster, Professor Lupin, Madam Pomfrey, and a few people from the Ministry, including the Minister and Healer Hippocrates Smethwyk. Healer Smethwyk, of course, was the head of the Dai Llewellyn Ward at St. Mungos. He was tasked with overseeing the test and taking notes of Professor Snape's new treatment to cure werewolves and provide immunity to others.

"This has been made possible by your efforts, Mr. Potter. You deserve to be here," Professor Snape said simply.

"Are you ready, Headmaster?" Healer Smethwyk asked, slightly unnerved by the items on the side table.

He knew a bit about muggle medicine, but he had never seen their tools first hand. The idea that this was common practice for muggles was surreal. There was so much power in blood that the thought of extracting blood samples from his patients

on the daily basis was unthinkable. However, learning that muggles donated blood to be given to others was even more baffling to him. To be so selfless as to give a bit of one's life force to a complete stranger. . . . It was quite humbling.

"Yes, Hippocrates, I'm ready," Dumbledore answered, looking up at Severus who had moved to his right side with the needle ready.

"I trust you know what you are doing, Professor Snape?" Smethwyk asked, eyeing the muggle items with unease. They were almost . . . alien.

"I have complete trust in Severus," Dumbledore interrupted, rolling up his sleeve and allowing Severus to clean the crook of his elbow.

The Minister and the others in the room watched in morbid curiosity as Severus inserted the needle after a quiet warning of coming pain to Dumbledore. Nearly immediately, the bag began to fill.

"Well, that is certainly a memorable feeling," Albus stated simply, squeezing a balled-up purple sock in his right hand to help the blood flow.

All the while, the reporter was scribbling away on her parchment as Severus motioned for Remus to take the bed beside the headmaster.

Less than ten minutes later, Severus swiftly removed the needle and applied pressure as Madam Pomfrey cast a quick healing spell.

"Thank you, Severus," Albus said, before taking the offered water from Pomfrey.

"What's the plan now?" Smethwyk asked Severus, looking at Remus.

"Now the reverse," Severus answered, before setting to work. "Know I'm going to cast *Petrificus Totalus* on you to prevent you from moving when the white magic begins to work."

"I understand, Severus," Remus stated.

With the needle in place and having ensured there were no air bubbles in the line, he cast the spell to make Remus still and levitated the full bag to float above Remus' head.

They watched as the bag emptied into Remus' veins, and at first nothing happened.

:The blood is moving to his heart: Coral hissed softly. :That is where the root of the curse lies:

Harry nodded, feeling traces of the white magic shift through the air from Remus as it began getting to work. Less than a minute later, a blinding flash of white light signaled it was done.

Harry stepped forward with a smile before anyone could do or say anything. "The curse is gone. I don't feel it anymore," he said, looking to Professor Snape.

"Splendid!" Dumbledore stated, hopping up and lifting the spell from Remus.

Remus sat up and tried to fight back the grateful tears now fighting to pour out. He managed to keep them at bay, and though the others could see his struggle, they didn't say anything.

O o O o O

Harry was on his way to the library with Neville and Dobby that Sunday. The school was still buzzing with what had transpired the previous day, and many wondered what it would lead to. Of course, as most things go in school, adult matters were quickly overshadowed by other things. Like snow.

"Hey, Potter," Draco said, coming up beside him as they made their way down the corridor, Vince and Gregory with him.

"Hey," Harry said.

Draco didn't even glance at Dobby, but Dobby didn't seem to mind.

"We're headed outside, want to come?" Draco asked. "Nott mentioned one of the upper years charming a snowman to dance when snowballs are thrown at it — it might still be there."

Interested, Harry nodded, deciding a break from going to the library might do him and Neville some good. They didn't seem to be getting anywhere with their research right then anyway.

Draco straightened in pleasure and once they were all set with their cold-weather robes, he opened the door for Harry as they went out.

Coral was nestled comfortably and warmly within Harry's robes. Only her head stuck out just above the clasp of his outer robe a few inches below his chin. She would not need to worry about being cold at all, as Harry's body heat was so close to her and several layers of cloth were between her and the outside air. Not to mention she also

had her silk 'sweater'.

With a nod of thanks, Harry passed Draco and went outside, finding the grounds of Hogwarts covered in another layer of snow. Evidently, it had snowed again the previous night.

"This way, Nott said it was just outside the greenhouses," Draco said.

Following Draco, Harry wished he could rub his hands together. It was rather cold out, even with his layers, and his hands were feeling a bit achy, to be honest. But the soreness was soon overlooked as they came upon the elaborate snowman wearing a bright red vest and with an enlarged quill for a nose.

Sure enough, the snowman began dancing when Draco picked up a handful of snow and threw it at him.

"This is brilliant, who made it?" Harry asked.

"Some seventh year from Ravenclaw is what I heard," Draco answered, making another snowball before trying to hit the snowman in the head.

He missed.

All of them joined in, well, save for Harry, but he was enjoying the fun along with them despite not being able to participate fully. Even Dobby attempted to hit the agile, animated snowman.

"Come on, we should head back inside," Neville said once the cold was beginning to be hard to ignore.

"Alright, but let's go around to the other entrance. I want to see if Flint was true to his word and made a fort," Draco said, once again leading the way.

"Alright there, Harry?" Neville asked, pausing when he noticed Harry grimace.

"It's nothing. My hands just aren't liking the cold much," he admitted.

"Why didn't you say something?" Neville asked, his voice worried.

"Master's hands are cold?" Dobby asked, his eyes growing wide in concern.

"No more than the rest of yours," Harry said lightly.

Really, did they have to make a big deal out of everything?

"Dobby will help," he said, snapping his fingers.

Suddenly, a soothing warmth enveloped his casts, giving his hands the heat they were craving. Harry couldn't help but exhale softly in relief.

"Thanks, Dobby," he said, wondering how many times he would say that before his hands were healed, and if Dobby would get tired of hearing it. Though, by the look on the elf's face, he doubted that would be any time soon.

"Hey, you guys coming?" Draco asked, noticing they were no longer following him.

"Yeah," Harry said, hurrying to catch up, Neville and Dobby with him.

Coming around the greenhouses, they could see the vegetable garden (though there wasn't really much growing there just then), and there were a few other students scattered throughout, some throwing snowballs at each other.

Walking further, they were able to see the fort Flint had mentioned to Draco. Flint and a few other Slytherins were pelting anyone with mounds of snow who ventured near. It was actually quite humorous.

"Hey, so he wasn't just kidding around," Draco said, running forward to join Flint in his assault against some Gryffindors and forgetting that they had been planning on going back inside.

"You can go ahead, Neville," Harry said kindly, having seen Neville's eyes look at those playing. "I'll be fine here."

"You sure?" he asked. "I don't want you to be left out."

"Not much anyone can do about that, so go ahead. Hit some Gryffindors for me with Draco. I can watch from here and keep score," Harry said with a smirk, actually not that bothered about not being able to join in.

"Alright, Harry," Neville said with a smile before going off and joining Draco and the other Slytherins.

Harry and Dobby watched the snowball fight ensue. Of course, those who had shelter had an advantage, so Flint and those on his side were living it up. Though, the twins from Gryffindor were certainly making things interesting.

"Fire!" one shouted.

"Reload!" the other said.

They had created a contraption that launched ten snowballs at once.

"Retaliate!" a Slytherin from within the fort said.

Harry smiled, part of him wishing he could be in there with them, but another admitting it was rather fun to watch without having to worry about being smacked with a handful of snow.

After a few minutes, Draco left the fort and began heading back to Harry. Neville, Vince, and Gregory continued helping Flint.

"You really are pathetic. You know that, right?"

Harry turned and found Smith leaning up against the tree behind him, the now permanent peeved look of Smith glaring back at him. Dobby straightened.

:I don't think I've ever wanted to bite someone more than I do now: Coral hissed quietly.

"What do you want, Smith?" Harry asked, bored with it all.

"You to know how lame you are," he said.

The very few people close enough to hear turned their attention to them. What was the idiot Hufflepuff up to now?

Dobby moved forward, clearly enraged someone would say that to his master.

"Dobby, don't do anything. He's not worth the effort," Harry said, feeling he had to say something, otherwise Dobby may just pounce on the ponce.

"Keeping your pet on a leash, I see," he sneered.

"He's not my pet, he's my friend," Harry answered with a bit of force.

A small crowd was beginning to form around them. Smith was eating it up. Harry was annoyed.

"Well, I suppose since he's been helping you with *everything*, it's easier to think of him that way. Tell me, Potter, how does it feel to have to rely on him to help you with certain *private* businesses? Are the bathroom stalls big enough to accommodate you both or do you have to choose to go at certain times of the day and hope no one walks in on you?"

Harry couldn't help but redden, recalling how that had been one of his concerns until Madam Pomfrey had set that straight. He liked Dobby and was grateful for everything he did for him, but the thought of him being *that* close to him . . . no. Just no.

About to reply to Smith's taunts, Harry was suddenly interrupted by a snicker, which quickly caved into full laughter.

Turning to his right, he was surprised to find Draco laughing and stepping out of the small group watching several yards away. Harry looked down, an odd feeling of sadness swelling in his chest. Was Draco laughing at him? But before he could do or say anything, the blond stepped directly in front of him and faced Smith.

Still chuckling a bit, Draco managed to calm himself so he could actually speak.

"You're the sorriest excuse for a pureblood I have ever seen, Smith, you daft arse. Every true pureblood knows the abilities of house elves. For centuries they have served wizards, and in that time they have never needed to resort to such embarrassing methods of care, even when their master can no longer get out of bed due to age or injury. Elves can vanish unwanted things in an area, Smith, even things they can't currently see, including waste that has yet to leave the body. Every wizard worth his wand knows that.

"It's really too bad you can't be taken care of in the same way, but I suppose you're not a thing. I wonder, though . . . what kind of twisted sicko are you? To have given so much thought about someone else's bodily functions. . . ."

Many of the students around snickered at that, and a few couldn't help but laugh out loud, to the utter shame and embarrassment of Zacharias Smith.

The humiliated boy reacted, quite unintelligently and immaturely, shouting the first offensive spell that popped into his demented mind as he thrust out his wand.

"Everte Statum!"

Draco was completely taken by surprise, as were everyone watching, and was blasted back — *hard*.

Unfortunately, Harry was right behind him.

Harry couldn't help but release a strangled cry as his hands and wrists jarred painfully against the unforgiving walls of the casts, the sudden pain so severe that he could have sworn his vision had flashed red as he landed on his back, Draco landing

upon him.

Draco scrambled up, horrified.

"Harry!" he shouted, watching as Coral slipped free and began hissing frantically at Harry, at the moment oblivious to the cold.

:Harry, don't let your magic touch it!: she cried.

:Too late: Harry managed to grit through his teeth as he tightly closed his eyes, not needing to see the black fire to know the curse had reawakened.

O o O o O

Severus was bored.

Really, how many times did they have to go through this? It wasn't like his lessons really needed to change all that much, and why should they even be discussing giving Professor Binn's requested five extra minutes of lecture time? It wasn't like the students were actually getting anything from the dead man's lectures, and the extra five minutes of painful boredom wouldn't improve matters at all for the students' education.

He really should figure out a way to get rid of the droning ghost.

"What do you think, Severus?" Albus asked, looking at him from over his half-moon spectacles. Clearly the Headmaster thought that the potions master was being too quiet.

"I frankly think it is a waste of time. We all know he's more of a fixture of Hogwarts than an actual professor. Giving the ghost another five minutes would be a mockery to rest of us who are actually teaching," Severus stated bluntly. "If we are seriously discussing altering the length of lectures, why not shorten History of Magic and give the time to a professor who will actually use it to benefit the students rather than bore them to death?"

"Severus!" Minerva admonished.

"I have to admit, I am with Severus, Headmaster," Sprout put in. "Cuthbert has taught for nearly four hundred years. Anyone would have lost touch with how to instruct students. And by simply looking at the numbers, how many students take History of Magic after their OWLs? I dare say I can count the number on one hand, which is really quite a shame."

"Pomona is right, Albus. Last year, only three students obtained a NEWT in History of Magic, and they had taught themselves because they had a personal interest in it. They hadn't taken Binn's class," Minerva relented.

"I see," Albus said, intrigued. He had never seriously taken the time to look into how History of Magic was doing.

It had been the same since Binns had taken the position, and no one had ever really questioned the situation. It was just another quirk of Hogwarts. A fixture. . . .

"What do you propose then?" he asked.

"Hire a new teacher," Severus replied simply, his voice totally detached.

"And where is Cuthbert to go?" Albus asked.

"He's an intellectual. Allow him to tutor those who care to listen. Perhaps he will not be as apt to drone then, and who knows, perhaps he will enjoy the arrangement," Severus answered.

Albus nodded, thinking it over. He wasn't averse to the idea. Even he remembered the ghost's tiresome lectures in his school days. "Perhaps over the summer I will be able to find a replacement and discuss it with Cuthbert. Any ideas to possible applicants?" he asked, his eyes passing over them all.

"Well, Albus, I believe—"

Abruptly, Severus stood up, interrupting Flitwick as he dashed out of the office and exclaimed, "Get Poppy! Potter's in trouble!"

O o O o O

Harry heard people shouting and crying, but it was all just a hum of chaos to him.

He couldn't see Dobby with a foot on Smith's back, preventing him from trying to run away again. He couldn't make out Draco calling his name, didn't know Neville had scooped Coral up from the ground beside him, and couldn't feel the cold snow melting beneath him and soaking into his robes.

All he could sense was the curse surging up his forearms, sucking at his magic and destroying bone as it went.

It's feeding off of my magic to do this, but I can't simply get rid of my magic, he thought through the pain. *I need to stop it! Can I dissolve it like Lycanthropy? Fire —*

think! Harry — think! How do you put out fire?

Smother it. . . . he answered himself, rolling to his side and grunting from the effort as he gathered as much magic as he could, even pulling magic from the potion soaked bandages in his desperate attempt to save himself.

Tears in his eyes and half of his face in the snow beneath him, he shoved it all, violently, down his arms and all the way to the tips of his fingers, ruthlessly crushing the curse and obliterating it with the sheer force of his frantic magic.

A rush of what he could only describe as steam flooded his body immediately after, as if red hot steel had been doused in water. There was no white magic, no brilliant flash of light, but an eruption of something even more powerful before it suddenly went utterly tranquil.

It had stopped.

The pain had stopped.

Although, now his hands and arms were completely numb.

He exhaled, his ears buzzing from the adrenaline still coursing through him.

"Harry?" someone asked him. He was too dazed to make out who it was.

"He needs to be taken to the infirmary," another said.

"Allow me," a slightly older voice said. He vaguely recognized the voice but couldn't remember from where.

"No, wait. No magic. We don't know what it might do."

"Neville's right. Flint?"

Suddenly, he felt himself get turned over and lifted up, his arms still wrapped and secured against him. Opening his eyes, he blinked, realizing his glasses must have fallen off during his struggle, but by the blurry colors of the person holding him, he was able to conclude they were a Slytherin.

"Just relax, I won't drop you," the large Slytherin boy said.

Flint?

Not really able to do anything else, he trusted him, but kept his eyes open, despite

feeling totally drained.

:Coral?: Harry hissed.

Surprisingly, Flint didn't even pause at hearing parseltongue, but quickly entered the castle at nearly a run and continued to the infirmary.

:I'm here, Harry. Neville is carrying me and we're following: Coral answered, hissing loudly from somewhere behind him so he could hear her over the echoing footsteps.

O o O o O

Professor Snape met up with them on the way to the infirmary, while the Headmaster, Professor Sprout and McGonagall continued to relieve Dobby of Smith.

Draco and the others were kept out of the infirmary once they arrived. Only Flint was ushered in, as he was carrying Harry. Soon after though, he joined them in the hall.

"Do you think he's alright?" Neville asked, looking to Flint as he was the last one there who saw him.

Flint looked down at Longbottom with an odd look on his face, as if he couldn't believe he was having a conversation with the Longbottom boy before he looked to the closed doors of the hospital wing.

"I believe he will be. Professor Snape seemed a bit relieved after he cast a diagnostic spell on him, though it's hard to tell with him," Flint said.

Draco released a sigh of relief, but then gave a startled gasp as the infirmary doors suddenly opened, Professor Snape exiting swiftly with his robes billowing behind him.

"Draco, walk with me," he stated, his eyes unreadable.

Obeying, Draco hurried to his side, leaving Neville and the others behind. Once they were halfway down the hall, Snape spoke again.

"Tell me what happened."

Draco quickly told him everything, including things that had occurred with Smith before the jealous snob erupted that day. He told him how Smith was continually throwing Potter hateful glares and the like, and that Neville had told him a few days ago about comments made by Smith in the dorms.

"Thank you, Draco. You may return to the infirmary," Snape said as they arrived in front of the Headmaster's gargoyle.

"Yes, sir," Draco answered, deciding he would ask about how Harry was doing later, as the man seemed distracted. He began to walk away.

"One moment, Draco," Snape said, taking a few steps forward and pulling out his wand.

Draco couldn't help but raise a questioning eyebrow, but then lowered it when it became clear his godfather was just making sure he was alright after enduring a pointblank spell to the chest. Once assured he was alright, Snape nodded him off. Draco hurried back to the infirmary, while the potions master muttered the ridiculous password and made his way up the spiral staircase to Dumbledore's office.

O o O o O

Next part, *Distraction*, is under construction.

Distraction

Part 18: Distraction

The Headmaster removed his glasses once Minerva had left his office. There was really too much going on to keep straight. Even with the help of his pensieve, he was finding it difficult to fight back the forming headache as he tried to organize it all and determine what options he had and which he should choose.

The fact someone was actively trying to kill Harry troubled him greatly, more so than knowing Voldemort had it in for the boy. At least he knew Voldemort and knew what to expect, more or less. But this . . . assassin, he didn't know anything about them, only that they were quite adept at sneaking around and knew how to get into one of the most well protected places in the Ministry. Granted, that was hardly miraculous, but still, to do so without anyone having proof of their actions . . . it was frightening.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, once again recalling the moment he had learned Harry had been attacked right in the walls of Hogwarts and in the middle of the Great Hall. His heart still clenched from the memory. If it hadn't been for Severus. . . .

He sighed. There was another thing he was having trouble wrapping around his mind. Severus' ability in halting the curse, though very fortunate, was . . . disturbing. Very few had such a grasp on dark magic to manipulate it in such a way, and for him to be able to quell the mass of horrid magic meant the man's magic was, to a certain degree, attune to such malicious power. It was very troubling, to say the least. When had he obtained such dark, magical intuition?

Ever since he had turned from Voldemort, Albus had kept a close eye on Severus, for his own good, and for the safety of everyone around him, including the students and the rest of his staff. Dark magic was a very dangerous trap, it could get nearly anyone addicted, and very often it took them beyond the point of no return if they did not have someone beside them pulling them back every so often. Dumbledore had hoped he would be able to be this person for Severus, but it seemed he had failed somehow; though, it seemed Severus had a handle on it, for which Albus was grateful.

But the question remained, where, when and how had Severus gained such strength and power over that which would corrupt and dominate lesser men?

He supposed he could have obtained some of it during the summers. There were times in which the young man would disappear for days on end. Until now, Dumbledore had been certain it was the way Severus prepared himself for the next

school year, like a mini-vacation. Of course, Severus had never called it that, but that was what Albus had assumed it was, after all, what else could it be? But now, he was not so sure.

Dumbledore shook himself. Even if what he now suspected was true, there was nothing he could do about it now. Besides, it seemed the younger man had it well in hand — he always did have an unusually strong grasp on dark magic — and it had certainly come to good use, so he couldn't really say anything against it now.

The Headmaster decided to refocus on more recent events, which were equally, if not more, unnerving.

Lucius Malfoy had brought Severus disturbing information. Dumbledore had no reason not to believe the man. Not only because of the life debt but because everything he had told Severus fit, and, after digging around on his own, he completely agreed with the blond pureblood. Something untowardly was going on in the Ministry, and it definitely led him to believe someone, or a group of individuals, had gained access to the Forbidden Library. Unfortunately, he had no way of knowing how much access they had gained, or for how long. He would have to assume Lucius had been right in his estimate, though, as he had been correct in the other things, it stood to reason he had been right in that as well.

Why would someone take so much time and trouble to obtain such a curse? There were other curses one could have used to send through in Manx parchment. Though, nothing as rare and difficult to destroy.

And there it was. That was the reason. All of the other spells Dumbledore knew of, dark and light, that could be attached to a letter and prove dangerous to the opener could be countered by most knowledgeable healers. Only this curse reacted contrary to what one would think, and often persisted until the victim's demise. Whoever had sent Harry that cursed letter truly wanted him to suffer and perish, and the fact they had targeted his hands was not missed by Dumbledore either. Just as they had placed the ICW seal on the letter, it was clear they liked sending underlying messages. Which told Albus something else about them. They were likely very intelligent and liked playing mind games.

Well, he had of course alerted certain individuals to his suspicions concerning the Forbidden Library, specifically Madam Bones, Alastor, and Kingsley. He left Lucius' involvement out of it. It would not do if whoever was after Harry discovered Lucius was on to them.

Dumbledore took a deep breath, his mind going to the events the day before.

Professor Sprout had contacted Smith's parents, and they would be coming down for a meeting in her office later that week. Besides that, Pomona had taken fifty points from Hufflepuff because of Smith's actions against Draco. The fact he had inadvertently harmed Harry was not put into account. That could be argued as an accident, no matter how deadly it could have become.

But the truth remained that Smith despised Harry.

It was rare that a student would be so malicious toward another member of their own house. It was actually nearly unheard of, and the fact that it was happening in Hufflepuff, arguably the most loyal house. . . . Albus knew it was a bit embarrassing for Pomona, as well as the rest of the Hufflepuffs.

He knew a number of students would be shocked Smith would not be expelled, particularly since his actions had almost killed someone. But it all had to be looked at objectively, and ultimately Smith's actions had been childish and done out of anger. If every student who behaved in such a way was expelled, he daresay at least a quarter of the student body would be gone before their third year.

However, Smith's actions would not go unpunished. Far from it.

As with all serious offences, the punishment was decided by the student's head of house, and so it came down to Pomona to decide Smith's punishment. On top of contacting his parents and removing fifty points, Pomona had assigned him a week of detention with her and a type of probation period that would last for two weeks. He would not be able to leave the Hufflepuff common rooms except for classes and meal times. If and when he had to go to detention, the infirmary or the library for any reason, he would need to be escorted by a prefect. Also, at all times, Pomona would know where he was. This would be done through house elves and prefects.

Oh, yes, for the next two weeks, Smith would have a very boring and restricted existence.

Albus only hoped it would wake the boy up and not make him become even more hateful.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, his thoughts fell to Harry.

The boy was advancing in magic faster than they had first anticipated when they had learned about him being a slumbering mage; although, his advancement was more out of necessity than actual conscious practice. He was proud of the boy, but also worried. Would they be able to provide the instruction he needed when his magical prowess continued to mature? Since his return to the wizarding world, Harry's

abilities had developed leaps and bounds beyond his first expectations, and he had already expected a fair deal initially.

The lad was already ahead of where Albus had been at his age; granted, having parselmagic did certainly give one an advantage, but even excluding that, his knowledge was beyond most of his peers. For right now, the only person who could give him a run for his money was Hermione Granger. He was truly amazed the girl hadn't ended up in Ravenclaw.

He refocused.

Harry's hands had once again escaped critical harm; though, like last time, they were not left unscathed.

The only consolation was that his bones had been completely mended by whatever Harry had done. According to Pomfrey and Severus, Harry had smashed the curse with his magic, smothering and completely obliterating it before it was able to respond to his magic and carry out the terrible reaction. Thus, Severus believed much of the magic and physical compounds left over from the destroyed curse had reverted back to the form it had been originally. It seemed that the reaction that had created the fire had been reversed by Harry's actions. The downside was that his nerves had been damaged in the process. The overwhelming surge of magic had acted much like a cruciatus curse.

Albus shook his head.

To compare the damage, a healer examining Harry without knowing what had happened would think the boy's arms — and only his arms — had suffered under the cruciatus for nearly a full minute without any pauses. It was not untreatable, but certainly not something one would wish on anyone, least of all a child.

Well, Severus had already set to work making the necessary potions, and, with any luck, Harry would be back to his old self by the end of the month at the latest.

O o O o O

Harry looked down at his hands and slowly closed them into fists. They were doing much better today. His fingers would still give an occasional twitch, but the involuntary spasms that had been prevalent the day after he had destroyed the curse were becoming rare now — thankfully. At first, he had been afraid of using his wand, in case a spell would go badly and make a buffalo land on him like it had that one fellow he had learned about.

He shook his hands out, happy the slight tingling sensation on his ring and pinky fingers was almost completely gone.

It had been nearly a week and a half since he had gotten his bones back. Professor Snape's potions seemed to be working well, and the potions master told him he was confident his hands would be back to normal in a few days. Harry was ecstatic. Although things were not as difficult as they had been when his hands were wrapped, he was looking forward to things going back to normal, and, who knew, maybe Professor Sprout would be able to begin giving him those lessons.

As for the individual responsible for his current state, Smith was practically a ghost now.

He had completely ostracized himself after lashing out at Malfoy. No one would willingly interact with him now, and even the prefects who were obligated to escort him to the library and such rarely spoke to him. It was clear they were quite displeased with him. Lost points aside, what truly irked them was how his attitude and actions had reflected poorly on their house. Hufflepuff was supposed to be the house of friendship and loyalty, not hatred and jealousy. Part of Harry actually felt sorry for Smith, but he had brought it on himself.

Smith's detentions with Sprout had ended, but he was still on a sort of house arrest. He still had a few days of it until he would be 'free' again, and hopefully he had learned his lesson. Only time would tell.

O o O o O

"Very good, Harry," Professor Sprout said with a smile as the tip of Harry's wand gave a slight glow.

He had been learning to cast a Lumos silently for the past few weeks. This had been the first time he had succeeded. Professor Sprout told him this was one of the best ways to train his magic to respond to his will and allow him to begin consciously controlling his magic outside his body (parselmagic excluded), with and without his wand.

His lessons with Professor Sprout were now every Friday during the free hour he had between his classes. At first, he had been a little disappointed in only having one day a week with her, but quickly changed his mind when he realized how much work he had from his other classes, on top of still helping Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing and learning from her. In the end, Harry acknowledged the need for him to have some down time, particularly with his friends.

He and Neville had, for the moment, given up on their research. Besides it being all a bit over their heads, the books they had access to didn't provide enough detail to fill in the massive gaps they were missing in medical knowledge — or at least that's how Harry felt. He had learned enough from his old muggle school to know that there was a bit more to the heart than it simply being a muscle that pumped blood. It had passageways, chambers, valves, and a network tied to the lungs to oxygenate the blood and send it back out to the rest of the body. For some reason, the books didn't go into the specifics like that, and though a paragraph or two would comment on what organs did, they would never detail how.

And Harry knew, if he was ever going to be able to help the Longbottoms, he would need to know a bit more about the nervous system than things like 'nerves are important, they send signals to the brain.' Well, duh.

In place of research, Harry had taken to teaching Neville. For a few hours a week, they put aside time to do the exercises Professor Sprout had taught Harry the previous Friday. It was helpful to Harry, as he had someone to practice with, and Neville was happy to learn another way to improve his magic abilities. Perhaps then his grandmother would not think so little of him.

Within the following month, the Ministry had begun distributing the vaccine among the population wishing to accept it, and a vast amount of werewolves had already received it. It was very likely Remus Lupin's words on the matter comforted many hesitant individuals unsure of the validity of the cure-through-blood-transfusion. He had agreed to be interviewed by a reporter from the Prophet by the name of Mark Carneirus the day after it had been verified he had been cured. Carefully monitoring the blood donations from former werewolves and those with the immunity, the Ministry was confident the werewolf population within England would drop well over 90 percent before the beginning of summer.

It was certainly good news, and the public was happy to hear the existence of werewolves may soon be a thing of the past. The Minister, of course, ate up the good press and basked in the glow of the historic moment. Harry was fine with the man doing that. The more attention he had, the less Harry had to deal with — though, of course, Harry's name was mentioned extensively within every article concerning the cure and white magic, but at least he was not being hounded by reporters.

"I think you'll have this spell down before classes end this term," Professor Sprout said as Harry smiled. "Casting silently is difficult to master, and though it isn't unheard of witches and wizards silently casting under stress, it's very hard to do successfully when one has never practiced it before, even with adrenaline."

"So, when would silent casting be good to have, exactly?" Harry asked.

"Well, Professor Flitwick would probably be the best to ask that to, but silent casting is mostly used in wizard duels. It makes it more difficult for your opponent if they don't know what spell is coming at them. Of course, some spells can be identified on sight, but not all."

Harry's eyebrows lifted slightly. "So, you could learn to cast any spell silently?"

"I suppose it's possible, but some spells are very difficult to successfully cast even when said out loud. Words are very important to the control of magic. With words come focus, intent, and power. You will always be able to make your spoken spells stronger than your silent ones. With your voice comes emotion, and emotion influences magic a great deal, more than anything else can. From what I understand of your parselmagic, this is especially so."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Besides speaking in parseltongue, it's really just about feeling and intent. As long as the words match that, it should work — well, while guiding the magic of course," Harry said with a shrug.

Professor Sprout gave a soft smile, wondering if he knew how amazing his abilities really were.

"Have you done anything other than healing with parselmagic?" she asked, curious.

"No, not yet. I've read the things that were in 'The Art of Parsel' concerning protective magic, but it's different from the healing aspect of parselmagic and I want to have more control before I try anything with it. The book warned that you could hurt yourself if you don't know how to deal with it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't exactly understand it all yet, but the book said it's like building a castle. If you build the walls wrong, it could fall in on you. You have to place the stones correctly."

"I see. Wards are much the same way; it's why the Headmaster is going to wait until the summer to strengthen the wards here. The magic on the grounds must be completely calm, and having hundreds of students about is not conducive to that," she said lightly.

Harry was about to ask more about wards, but, before he could, a white hot pain erupted from his scar and a feeling of dark elation flashed within it. With a pained

hiss, his right hand flew up to his forehead and he stumbled back into the desk behind him.

"Harry? !" Professor Sprout asked, instantly by his side.

And then, just like that, it was gone, though there was a lingering soreness at his scar and an odd sense that *something* was coming together.

"What's wrong?" she asked again as he slowly looked up at her.

"I don't know. My scar just suddenly felt like it was burning."

"How does it feel now?" she asked, her eyes looking at it when he lowered his hand a little.

"It's just a little sore now," he said, rubbing it. "It's never felt like that before. With Quirrell, it would slowly build up to that, not suddenly flash. Does . . . does it mean Voldemort is close or something?"

"Let's go see the Headmaster. Perhaps he will know what is going on," she said, already guiding him toward the door.

She clearly wasn't going to fool around with this, and Harry was glad for it. Even now, it was strange to have teachers who actually paid attention to him and were so quick to help. At his old muggle school, he was lucky if he even received a smile.

Walking beside Professor Sprout, they made it to the entrance of Dumbledore's office.

"Sherbet ice cream," Sprout stated, causing the gargoyle to move aside.

O o O o O

Albus looked up from his desk, a bit surprised to learn who was at the door, but he kept his face unsurprised and cheerfully called them in. Perhaps today one of his staff would accept a lemon drop!

"Oh, hello, Harry, Pomona," he greeted. "Lemon drop?"

"No thanks, Headmaster," Pomona answered quickly, already motioning for Harry to come in front of her.

Harry looked up at her, a little uncertain of how to begin.

"Is something the matter?" Dumbledore shifted forward a bit, quickly becoming serious and wanting to know what was going on, lemon drops temporarily forgotten.

"Harry and I were in my office a little bit ago, and while we were talking, he suffered a brief but intense bout of pain in his scar. As the last time this happened, You-kn— . . . Voldemort was near, I decided it would be best to immediately come to you," she said.

Albus stood up and came around the desk and stopped in front of Harry.

This was definitely troubling, but surely Voldemort wasn't still somewhere in the castle. . . . Dumbledore frowned, trying to figure out why Harry's scar would act up when, to his knowledge, Voldemort was gone. After that brief confrontation in the forest before Christmas, Albus was fairly certain he had forced him away, as he hadn't been able to detect Tom's presence again. However, the fact Riddle had been capable of using magic against him like that had been alarming and he wasn't about to put his guard down. He wasn't sure how Voldemort had been able to explode the clearing, but couldn't help but fear Tom had found another willing host or had taken enough magic from Quirrell to temporarily 'manifest' himself into a physical being. Either possibility was worrying, but he hoped, whichever the case, Tom would not be bothering Harry again anytime soon.

"What did you feel exactly when it happened?" Dumbledore asked, motioning Harry to take a seat across his desk.

"Well, sudden pain and . . . I don't know, excitement, maybe?" Harry said uncertainly as he sat down.

"Excitement?" Sprout asked, confusion clear in her voice.

"It was weird. It was like I learned something good was coming, and I couldn't wait for it to happen. It was only there for a second, but. . . ." Harry shook his head. "I don't know, maybe I imagined it. My scar was very hot, and it startled me. I don't understand where the feeling came from or why I felt it. I'm not exactly sure now what I felt, but I felt . . . something."

Albus frowned, a disturbing theory rising up in his mind.

There had never been a scar like Harry's before. It made sense that there would be unexpected and unforeseen consequences with it.

"Headmaster?" Pomona asked, looking up at him and finding his eyes holding a grim and troubled light.

"Harry, from the moment I saw your scar, I knew it would be unlike any scar in existence," Dumbledore said softly, kneeling down beside Harry's chair. He really didn't want to tell Harry his theory, but, recalling what the sorting hat had told him and knowing he couldn't not tell him now, he gathered himself and continued. "I have a theory, no more than that. It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong emotion."

Harry swallowed. "Professor Snape told me my scar is sensitive to Voldemort's magic because it was created by him, and that's why it hurts when he's close — but there's actually more to it than that?"

"You and he are connected by a curse that failed. Such things have happened in the past, but never with such a dark curse. Never with a curse meant to instantly kill. If I am not mistaken, Harry, he unintentionally forged a deep bond between himself and you that night. To cast the killing curse, one must saturate their mind and heart with hatred and an intent to kill so potent that it is the only thing they are aware of in that instant."

"That must be a lot of hate," Harry whispered, conscious of Professor Sprout stepping to the other side of his chair.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, and that is why I think this bond formed. His hatred for you had touched you while it was still connected to him, while his focus was still completely on his intent, and when the curse failed and returned back to him, I believe that connection was never severed."

O o O o O

Neville slowly sat down beside Harry. They were by the lake, and it was Sunday. The snow had long since melted and Spring had finally begun.

"Hey, Neville," Harry said softly.

"Hey."

Harry had already told him what he had learned from Dumbledore. Neville turned his eyes to the lake, wondering how Harry could appear so calm about it. If it was him, he'd have locked himself in an empty room and cried.

"I'm okay," Harry whispered after a long silence.

Neville returned his gaze to Harry, amazed to find his friend's unwavering eyes staring right back at him, but he knew Harry was not alright, despite his brave front.

"No, you're not," Neville stated, part of him appalled he had just blurted that, but he knew he was right as Harry looked away and closed his eyes. "But I know you will be," he added softly.

After a moment, Harry slowly nodded, his shoulders no longer slouching as he focused his eyes across the lake.

"I hate him, Neville," Harry stated, his voice so tight it sounded as if it might break. "I hate him, and the thought that I can feel. . . ." He swallowed thickly. "This connection will not last forever. I will make sure of it. Someday, I will finish the job that reflected curse started." Harry looked back at Neville. "He won't kill anyone ever again, not if I can stop it."

Neville didn't break eye contact as he nodded stiffly. "And I will help you."

Harry looked back across the water and gave a soft smile. "I know."

O o O o O

With less than three months left of classes, the professors were really beginning to pile on the assignments, which caused Harry and Neville to claim the far corner table in the library. It was the late afternoon and the library was beginning to empty, as dinner was approaching.

"I've gotta go back to the common room before dinner. I promised Hannah I would. Later," Susan said.

"Okay, bye, Susan," Harry said as she gathered her things and headed out.

Harry put down his book and retrieved his transfiguration homework to check something. He rubbed his scar with his free hand.

His scar had stubbornly been aching on and off since the previous week. It had gotten to the point that it was more an annoyance than anything else. Professor Sprout said to come to her if it suddenly changed or got worse, but unfortunately there was nothing anyone could really do at the moment to stop the pain.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, glancing around and noticing they were alone.

"Yeah?"

"You think you could show me again what Professor Sprout taught you Friday?" he asked hopefully.

"Yeah, sure," Harry said, quickly putting away his things. He had just about finished anyway and wanted a break. "Okay, so what you want to do is get your silent lumos to work, and then hold it. Once you have that down, you fluctuate the magic you let into your wand, so the light at the tip blinks."

Neville nodded, pulling out his wand as Harry followed suit.

Harry closed his eyes for a few seconds and then reopened them. A second later, narrowing his eyes in concentration, the tip of his wand lit up. Coral lifted her head out of his sleeve a bit as the light began to flicker, blinking on and off, but Harry couldn't remain focused and the wand tip went out and remained dark.

"It's a bit harder than it sounds, but Professor Sprout said it helps teach our magic to maintain spells for a longer period of time and while we're distracted. Go on and try it, Neville," Harry said with a shrug.

Neville nodded, scrunching up eyebrows and focusing. Blinking several times, his eyes fixated at the tip of his wand, before it slowly began to glow. Beaming triumphantly, Neville unfortunately lost his concentration and it dimmed before completely going out.

He sighed.

"You'll get it, Neville," Harry encouraged. "A few weeks ago you couldn't even get it lit."

"Yeah, that's true," he said, before concentrating again.

Harry smiled, before trying it again himself.

"Hey, look!" Neville said, forgetting he was in the library, but, oddly, Madam Pince didn't come and hush them.

"Very good, Neville," Harry said, watching as Neville had been able to silently make his wand's light flicker for a five seconds. "Hey, let's try to match each other's blinks."

"Okay," Neville said excitedly.

Harry smiled, amused by Neville's enthusiasm.

:Hey, Harry, are you two planning on going to dinner any time soon?: Coral interrupted.

:Huh?:

:I think dinner has started: she stated. If snakes could smirk, she would be.

"Neville, I think we're late for dinner," Harry said, hurriedly standing up. "No wonder it's so quiet in here now."

"What? How—oh, oops. I guess we got distracted," Neville said, stuffing his wand up his sleeve to his holster and quickly gathering his things.

"Good thing we were already planning on carrying our things with us to the Great Hall. We'd miss half of the feast if we had to go back to the common room," Harry said, swinging his bag over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Neville agreed, before dashing out of the library beside Harry, happy Madam Pince wasn't there to tell them to slow down.

Jogging down the corridors, Harry couldn't help but feel a bit unnerved by how quiet the castle was. It was strange to know everyone was at dinner and it was only him and Neville out in the halls.

"You think we'll be in trouble with Professor Sprout?" Neville asked worriedly.

"No, it was an accident that we lost track of time. Besides, it's not like we're missing the entire meal," Harry said, going around a corner — only to come to a dead stop.

"*Ooooph*!" Neville couldn't help but gasp as he ran right into Harry's outstretched arm which had shot out the second he had come around the bend.

"Don't move . . ." Harry breathed.

And Neville instantly obeyed, for there was a humungous scaly thing blocking the entire corridor in front of them.

A dragon.

For a long moment, it didn't seem to notice them. It was too concerned with dislodging its wing from the corner of the ceiling where it was pinned. It squirmed about, its hard scales grinding up against the stone walls and causing the stones to crack and crumble. Turning its head, trying to shift its way free, it suddenly noticed Harry and Neville. It froze.

:Aww, she's only a baby . . . : Coral hissed sadly, as if she was seeing an adorable little puppy instead of a giant, fire breathing reptile.

:A baby?: Harry asked, astonished, staring up at the creature whose body was touching all sides of the hall and likely covered the whole length of it beyond where they could see.

How could this be a baby?

Though, now that Coral mentioned it, she, the dragon, did look a bit disproportioned like a baby. Her wings seemed too small for her body (though they were still huge), and her large eyes gave her an adorable look (if one ignored the dangerous claws, teeth, and spikes).

"Harry?" Neville whispered, terrified. "What should we do?"

"Not sure yet," Harry admitted very quietly, keeping his eyes locked on the dragon. "Coral says she's a baby dragon."

"Baby dragons are not this big," he answered, their voices so quiet they sounded more like scratches on a wall.

:Comfort her, Harry: Coral urged, obviously pained by seeing the young dragon's discomfort.

:How?: Harry asked rather loudly.

He had no idea how to comfort baby dragons!

But Coral didn't answer as the dragon suddenly moved her head closer to them, her long neck curving down as Harry's hissed question echoed around them.

Harry held his breath, wondering how fast fire could kill. Perhaps if he pulled Neville and himself back around the corner they would be safe from any flames?

But she didn't breathe any fire; instead, she looked at them curiously, particularly Harry.

"Hello," Harry said uneasily, but that caused her to rear back suddenly and defensively.

:No, no, Harry, speak parseltongue: Coral advised quietly in his sleeve.

Harry kept his arms down and his hands visible, keeping his eyes locked with the dragon's. Shouldn't he and Neville be running?

:Hello, please don't hurt us: Harry said, a bit unsure of what to say.

Would she be able to understand?

Well, it didn't look like she understood, but she did respond to Harry's voice by easing her head back down, becoming curious again. Harry was beginning to believe Coral was right. Only a very young creature would act like this.

Harry motioned Neville with his hand to stay where he was.

:Well, I suppose I'll just keep on talking: Harry said, allowing his voice to grow louder and echo around the corner and down the hall behind them. The dragon seemed to like that and grew calmer.

Harry glanced at the walls with her scaly body pressed up against them. That couldn't be comfortable, and that also raised an interesting question. How in the world did she get here? The doors were not big enough and certain corridors were too narrow and low to allow her passage. Strange.

:You're stuck pretty good, aren't you?: Harry asked, before tentatively taking a small step forward. :We're not going to hurt you: he soothed, earning a low growl from her as he approached, but it wasn't exactly a threatening one, and it wasn't even a real growl. It was more like a dragon moan. A whimper.

:She's injured herself: Coral stated.

Harry nodded in agreement. :Should we go get help?:

:We can't leave her alone, she might hurt herself more: Coral answered.

Fighting back a sigh, Harry refocused. :I'm going to come closer, alright? I'm going to see if I can help you. So no fire please, and no biting: he said.

His only answer was the cocking of her head, as if she was wondering what to do with him. Harry hoped she wasn't thinking about food.

"Harry?" Neville asked worriedly, remaining by the corner.

Harry glanced back. "It's alright. I don't think she's aggressive."

:Careful, Harry: Coral said, having watched how the dragon tensed slightly when she heard English.

:It's alright, I was just talking to my friend, Neville: he said, motioning to Neville and trying to make it clear Neville was friendly.

That seemed to appease her, but she then shifted again to try to get comfortable, only to break off a chunk of the ceiling's decorative crown molding with her pinned wing. The hunk of stone plummeted down, shattering on the floor and narrowly missing the dragon's neck.

The dragon swung her head wildly and nearly struck Harry with her stubby horns on her head.

"Look out, Harry!" Neville shouted, stumbling forward as shattered rock peppered the hall.

Harry dived backward, feeling a number of small stones shower his arm, neck and shoulder as he twisted about. The dragon gave a strangled and frightened rumble as the sound of the granite shards resonated around them.

Then it was over.

Harry sat up as Neville knelt beside him. Both breathing heavily, they looked to the dragon who was now resting her head on the floor. Harry shifted forward and crawled the five or so feet to her.

She looked at him, too hurt and tired to really move any more, though she still tried.

:Shhh, don't move: Harry said, approaching her large head, which could probably swallow him whole without too much difficulty if she had the energy.

She gave the pitiful whimpering sound again before Harry placed his hand on the side of her nose. At his contact, she grew silent and still.

Harry didn't know why, perhaps it was because he didn't know what else to do or because the hall had grown too quiet, but he began humming. He didn't really know the words to the song, but it was a melody he had learned at school. It was some sort of lullaby, and he had some times hummed it to himself when he was locked in his cupboard. It was a slow, comforting tune, and he could hum it quietly enough not to bother the Dursleys.

Neville quickly caught on and joined in his humming as Harry slid forward, moving by her neck to make sure the rock had actually missed. He glanced at Neville and nodded at him to continue humming as the dragon closed her eyes.

Harry allowed his magic to move down to his left hand, and, with Coral, he assessed the dragon's injuries. Only Neville was humming now, but the dragon didn't seem to mind. Harry couldn't help but frown as he felt an odd sort of magic covering her. It

reminded him a bit of the hexes that students would come in with sometimes, only, this wasn't a hex, it was . . . a charm? As for her injuries, they weren't serious, so he focused on figuring out what to do with the charm.

:Cancel it: Coral stated. :Maybe it's what's made her so big:

Harry had watched Madam Pomfrey cancel hexes and other spells on students, of course, but for the life of him he couldn't remember the incantation. However, he decided that wasn't a problem. He'd lifted curses, why not charms or other spells?

Well, here goes nothing, Harry thought, preparing his magic.

:Spell, be canceled:

O o O o O

The feast, as always, was delicious, but Pomona was distracted.

Where were Harry and Neville? They normally sat near Susan, Justin and Ernie, but they weren't there, in fact, unless she was blind, they were not even in the Great Hall.

Well, it wouldn't be the first time a student or two had skipped dinner, and knowing Harry and Neville, they had likely taken advantage of the empty common room and were practicing the silent lumos.

She turned her eyes away from the Hufflepuff table and looked to Filius who was saying something to Minerva. However, she wasn't able to hear Minerva's reply because Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor ghost, came barreling through the doors of the Great Hall.

"Headmaster, there's a giant dragon near the library, fourth floor!" he shouted.

And the Great Hall promptly fell into chaos.

Only for it to be utterly smashed by Dumbledore as he stood up and roared, **"SILENCE!"**

He hadn't even used his wand.

He then turned and glanced at Severus, Hagrid, Remus, and Filius, making it clear he had selected them to accompany him. He then spoke softly to Minerva.

"Seal the Great Hall behind us. I will send a patronus once it is safe," he said, barely

being overheard by Pomona.

As Filius moved to follow Albus and the others, Pomona leaned toward him.

"Harry and Neville are not in the Great Hall. Find them," she said quickly.

Filius looked back at her, startled by the news. "We will find them, Pomona," he promised.

With that, the five professors hurried out, leaving the other professors with the rest of the students. McGonagall sealed the Great Hall the moment they were out.

O o O o O

Severus and the others hurried toward the library, but on the second floor, the Headmaster grabbed Severus' arm.

"The wards on the third floor have been breached," Dumbledore stated.

"Find that dragon, I'll investigate the breach," Severus stated, already turning to go the fastest route to the forbidden, third floor corridor.

With a nod, Dumbledore and the others continued on.

Wand in hand, Severus ran. Although the real stone was not in danger, it would not do to make it appear that way. And who knew, perhaps this wasn't Voldemort, but some other thief who had somehow learned about the stone being within Hogwarts. They had certainly come up with an interesting distraction.

Coming to the doors, he could tell Fluffy was agitated. Well, that likely meant the thief had gotten past. Waving his wand, he conjured a magic flute, playing a soft lazy tune. Cracking the door open, he let the music work, allowing him to go down through the trapdoor without incident.

It did make Severus wonder how the thief had gotten past so quickly without leaving any blood behind though, as it was clear Fluffy had not been put to sleep by them.

Going past the other defenses was a breeze, though Remus' had not been what he had expected.

Entering the room, he could quickly tell the person before him had simply blasted their way through, as shards of weapons were everywhere. Perhaps they had been charmed to attack intruders?

Moving further into the room and toward the door that led to Dumbledore's 'final' protection, he heard an odd sound to his left.

Turning, and lifting his wand slightly, his heart couldn't help but clench tightly in his chest at the sight before him.

On the floor was the rune network Harry had made to send him back, and, kneeling at the edge, finishing it, was . . . Harry.

Not the young man he had grown into, but as he was now. A first year, innocent and unburdened by the turmoil of war. Severus could even see Coral around his small wrist as he etched the rest of the network into the floor.

Severus held his breath, recognizing this was somehow part of the protection Remus had placed, but at the moment too shaken to care.

Suddenly, the 'phantom' Harry stopped and looked up at him.

He smiled. "Will I have to die and send you back again?"

"*Riddikulus*!"

The boggart fled, and Severus swiftly conjured a cabinet and slammed it in there.

Calming his raging heart, for the appearance of the boggart had admittedly taken him by surprise, Severus forced himself to calm.

It was only a boggart, playing on your doubts and fears, he told himself furiously. *It was not an omen of coming failure. Harry would not have sent you back for that!*

Severus refocused, forcing down the chill that had risen inside him. After all, there was an intruder, and he had to catch them, whoever they were. He could not afford to be distracted.

Adequately collected now, Severus moved toward the door leading to the final chamber where the Mirror of Erised resided. Crossing the threshold, Severus felt the faintest trace of a detection ward. It had not been placed by Dumbledore. He pressed on.

Stopping at the top of the stairs, he found a cloaked figure standing in front of the mirror. The stout man was standing straight and stiff, as if he was very important.

"Ah, Severus. How fortunate it was you the old man sent," the man stated.

His voice was slightly garbled, as if layered over another voice.

Severus felt his mark warm slightly and his eyes widened.

Thinking quickly, Severus selected a course of action.

"My Lord," he answered, bowing his head submissively.

"Yes, Severus, it is I," Voldemort answered, turning around.

Severus risked a glance up with his eyes, but kept his head bowed and his wand down, no matter how much he wished to curse the being before him. With his glance, he could not see Voldemort's face. His hood obscured it, as it seemed to be spelled; however, he could see two glaring red eyes glowing through the darkness within the hood.

"Come to me, Severus, aid your master," he said.

Severus went down the stairs, trying to identify the voice Voldemort's was overlapping. It sounded familiar. Very familiar. And then it clicked.

Pettigrew.

With his mind occluded, he kept his gaze away from the surface of the mirror and hoped he would be able to keep all emotion from his voice.

"Retrieve the stone for me, Severus."

Severus swallowed. "Master, the stone is not here."

The temperature in the room plummeted, and Severus' hand tightened around his wand.

"Do you know where it is hidden, then?" Voldemort asked dangerously.

"Dumbledore did not tell anyone where he hid it," Severus lied. "But he did tell me he placed it under a Fidelius."

"And who is the secret keeper?"

"Dumbledore, my Lord."

Severus could feel Voldemort's rage growing, his magic suffocating the room. Furiously, Voldemort sent a blasting hex at the mirror, shattering it spectacularly as it

was slammed into the back wall.

"Then this course is closed to me. I will go another route," he stated.

"My Lord, do you need assistance leaving the castle? I can misguide Dumbledore and the others away," Severus suggested, sounding as helpful and as willing as he could while he tried to determine what he should do now.

"That will not be necessary, my loyal spy. You must continue to act as you have to keep the old man fooled." Voldemort's wand fell from his sleeve and into his right hand.

"My Lord?"

"Duel me, Severus, or has the ten years of teaching snot-nosed brats softened you?" he asked, before leaping back and firing a diffindo at him.

Severus deflected it instinctively.

"Good good, Severus. I see you have kept your reflexes. But have you kept your power? *Crucio! Incendio! Sectumsempra!*"

Severus dodged and deflected them all.

"Come now, Severus, surely you can send something back? It would be suspicious if only my spells marked the walls. Show me my spy is still the best of my servants!"

At that, Severus returned fire.

Mindful of his advanced abilities, he downplayed them. However, he was finding it difficult to do so. Several times he had to consciously miss Voldemort, knowing if he scored a hit the Dark Lord would be enraged, and may view him more as a threat than a worthy servant.

If Voldemort was not possessing Pettigrew and had his own body, Severus might have thrown his lie of being the Dark Lord's spy aside, but as it stood now, even if he struck Voldemort down, his spirit would live on. Voldemort had no real attachment to anything he possessed, no matter how deeply entrenched he was in them.

"Enough, Severus," Voldemort stated, stopping suddenly. "I am satisfied."

"Thank you, my Lord. I am here to serve you," Severus said, bowing his head again.

"Now, to seal this ruse," he stated, lifting his wand once more.

Severus didn't move, knowing this was going to hurt and there was nothing he would be able to do about it, not unless he wanted to discard the progress he had just made in strengthening his position as a loyal, dark spy.

"*Diffindo! Crucio!*"

Severus felt the first spell slash into him, and he couldn't help but grow alarmed as he felt it grind against his ribs, but then those concerns were pushed aside as pain all over assaulted him.

Perhaps he had not downplayed his abilities well enough. . . .

Voldemort held the crucio longer than Severus had anticipated, but he endured and did not scream. He would not give the monster that pleasure and would let him think it was another display of 'worthiness', rather than the defiance it really was.

Finally, it ended.

Severus didn't bother to look up.

"Stupify!"

O o O o O

Dumbledore led the professors up toward the library, confident Severus would be able to handle whoever the intruder happened to be.

Slowing slightly as they approached the hall leading to the library, they suddenly heard . . . giggling?

Dumbledore came around the corner, finding the last thing he had expected.

The hall was a complete mess. There were chunks of rock everywhere and parts of the floor had been cracked by, what he was able to conclude, falling stone. The molding on the ceiling had taken a beating and the walls appeared to have been scraped by something very hard.

However, this was not what surprised him most.

Standing in the middle of the hall were Harry and Neville, and in Harry's arms, wrapped in robes, was a very young dragon. The dragon butted its head against Harry's, causing both boys to laugh at the dragon's playfulness.

Suddenly, Neville looked up.

"Headmaster!" Neville gasped.

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling brightly. Remus' eyebrows had disappeared into his hairline and Filius gave a surprised squeak. Hagrid hurried forward.

"Aww, isn't he just the cutest thing!" Hagrid gushed.

"Actually, Hagrid, he's a she," Harry gently corrected as the professors came closer.

"She was *huge* when we found her, but Harry canceled the spell and she immediately shrunk down," Neville explained as the dragon snuggled against Harry, which only made Hagrid grow more paternal.

"May I hold her, 'Arry?" Hagrid asked, his eyes brimming with hopefulness. Harry couldn't say no.

Slightly disturbed by the large man she was being handed to, the dragon gave a few panicked, chirpy grunts.

:It's alright, girl. Hagrid won't hurt you, he's very gentle: Harry comforted as he gave her a gentle pet on the head.

Seeing her uneasiness, Hagrid quickly dug into his pockets and pulled out . . . a chunk of meat. He broke off a bit.

Harry blinked but decided not to question it.

"'Ere we go, let's see if she'll like this," Hagrid said, holding it out for her.

She didn't need much encouragement to go into Hagrid's empty hand after that, chomping down on the red steak with vigor as Hagrid held her.

"Just look at the little darling," he said as she nearly took a chunk of his finger with the meat.

Harry could only shake his head in amazement before looking to Dumbledore, Lupin, and Flitwick.

"I am very glad to see you two are safe and, I must say, I am quite impressed with how you two were able to handle this. Usually dragons are very difficult to approach, no matter their age," Dumbledore praised.

"Well, we couldn't just leave her. She was hurting herself and her wing was pinned against the ceiling. Besides, she was actually rather calm. I think she was relieved to

be found," Harry said.

"Yeah," Neville agreed. "Once Harry touched her nose and started humming, it was easy after that."

Flitwick perked up at that. "Humming?"

Harry reddened. "Well, Coral said she was a baby, and I knew this lullaby tune . . . figured it might help, and it did."

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes glowing with amusement and pride before glancing at Hagrid. "I trust you will be able to care for her until I can arrange a new home for her, Hagrid? I believe I have a possible place in mind."

"Of course, Headmaster," Hagrid immediately answered, utterly thrilled. "She needs a name though. How about Norberta?" he suggested helpfully.

"Er — alright," Harry answered, a bit unsure about the name, but it did seem to fit — in an odd sort of way.

"Splendid!" Dumbledore said, about to motion them to follow him, but he stopped when Harry gasped.

Hand flat against his scar, Harry grit his teeth and closed his eyes in intense pain.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked, placing his hand on his shoulder to stabilize him. Remus looked alarmed.

"He's furious. Mad that he's been tricked," Harry managed, before having to swallow back bile.

"Filius, Remus, escort Harry and Neville to the infirmary. Seal it once you are within. Hagrid, I will leave you to the dragon. I need to find Severus," Dumbledore stated, before turning and bolting to the third floor as fast as he could.

O o O o O

Next part, *Unlikely Hero*, is under construction.

The Unexpected Hero

A/N: Sorry for the long wait, but I had trouble getting over a bout of writer's block and then figuring out how to post despite the site's issues. But that aside, I decided to change the title a bit. This one fit better; though, I was tempted to cut this part in two, but decided not to. It covers a lot, but cutting it in half would make two rather small parts. Anyway, I hope this long part will make up for having to wait so long for it :P. Well, enjoy.

Part 19: The Unexpected Hero

Albus would likely never admit it to anyone, but he was panting by the time he made it to entrance of the final chamber; however, he didn't stop to breathe, but entered, his wand held aloft in case he needed to cast immediately.

His eyes quickly took in the room, finding the Mirror of Erised shattered at the far wall directly in front of him. He pulled his eyes away from the broken surface and looked elsewhere, trying to find Severus.

The residue of dark spells was pungent in the room and all of the walls were covered in horrible marks, but one wall was by far the worst, for it had the unmistakable red of blood smeared across its surface. A dark form was beneath it.

"Severus!"

He hurried forward, fearing the worst as he caught sight of a pool of blood beginning to gather under the potion master's limp form.

On his way forward, Albus swiftly scanned the rest of the room, quickly determining the intruder was long gone. He and Severus were alone.

Shifting Severus onto his back, grateful but worried upon hearing the young man's ragged breathing, Dumbledore promptly spelled the upper half of the black robes open to quickly find the source of the bleeding. He was horrified by what he found. It was a massive gash. It started just below his right collar bone and went all the way down and around to the tip of his lowest right rib. Albus' heart lurched, for the wound was not only long, but very deep. He could see the white of bone.

"Severus, hang on!" he urged, despite knowing his former student was unconscious. He pointed the tip of his wand at the top of the long gash, before slowly moving his wand down over it and back again several times. "*Vulnera Sanentur . . . Vulnera Sanentur . . . Vulnera Sanentur. . .* ."

Slowly, much of the blood that had soaked Severus' robes and had pooled around him began seeping back into the wound, the flesh around it pulling back together and rejoining. The Headmaster was not a licensed Healer by any means, but he wasn't a novice either.

Once certain he had treated Severus the best he could, he levitated him up and hurried to the infirmary.

O o O o O

Sitting on the bed in the infirmary, Harry and Neville swung their legs back and forth, waiting for the 'lock-down' to be lifted. Harry wondered what was going on. Had Voldemort entered the castle again? Had he used Norberta as a distraction? It certainly seemed so. It would explain why his scar had hurt, and why Dumbledore had hurried off as he had.

When he asked the professors what was going on, they didn't really give him an answer, though they did appear worried, which unsettled him. Where was Professor Snape? And why had Dumbledore said he needed to find him?

Suddenly, Harry got his answer as the doors to the infirmary opened and the Headmaster swiftly entered. Professor Snape was hovering beside him, as if being carried by an invisible stretcher.

"Poppy, Blood-Replenishing Potion," Dumbledore stated, sweat actually visible on his brow.

It was clear to Harry and the others he had likely ran the entire way from wherever he had found the Potions Master.

With a gasp, Madam Pomfrey hurried to the cabinet as Dumbledore brought Snape forward and gently placed him on the bed near the back of the infirmary. Harry got off the bed he had been sitting on and hurried over to help as well.

"What happened?" Harry asked, dismayed by the state of his favorite professor. There was blood on his robes and his skin was very pale. Also, on his chest was a long, very fresh scar.

Dumbledore didn't answer him; instead, he turned to Lupin and Flitwick.

"I've already sent a message to Minerva. The students will remain locked down in the Great Hall until we are certain the intruder is out of the castle. I've sent for Pomona and a few of the other professors to help us with the sweep."

He looked back to Professor Snape, who was still unconscious. Harry was now right by the bed.

:I sense dark magic, Harry: Coral warned.

:Yes, I do too: Harry answered.

Poppy came forward with the potion, pausing as she found the Headmaster looking intently at Severus.

"Call me when he wakes. Also, no one outside this room is to know he has been hurt, understood?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes lastly falling to Harry and Neville.

"We understand, sir," Harry answered as Neville nodded.

The Headmaster motioned to Lupin and Flitwick and promptly left with them.

"Neville, if you would, go retrieve a jar with the label 'dittany' for me," Madam Pomfrey said as she waved her wand over the professor to ensure there was nothing dangerous . . . to any of them. She then spelled the blood-replenishing potion into him before nodding to Harry to begin his own work as Neville brought her the dittany.

Not needing to be prompted further, Harry placed his left hand on the man's bare shoulder, a few inches above where the top of the scar began.

:What's wrong?: Harry whispered, sending forth his magic as images flashed in his mind's eye.

He saw the nicks on Snape's ribs where the curse had slashed into him and he saw close up images of the scar tissue gathered where the Headmaster had just recently closed the grievous wound. There was also swelling at the back of the professor's head, as if he had slammed his skull against something hard several times. Thankfully, there were no skull fractures. There was also some odd swelling on his inner left forearm, but it wasn't as severe, so Harry paid it little mind. There were more serious injuries to be concerned about at the moment as he was then shown very quick flashes of something else entirely.

His breath caught; the images he was witnessing now were very similar to something he had seen once before.

Thankfully, these were not as severe, but it was still alarming and he swallowed thickly.

The professor's nerve endings in his fingers and extremities were damaged, and the tissues surrounding them were swollen. In fact, nearly all of the man's nerves had suffered some degree of trauma, and Harry's mind quickly came to the answer.

Just like the Longbottoms, Professor Snape had been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry said, his voice a little unsteady. "The Cruciatus Curse."

Her eyes widened, pausing in her preparation of the dittany. Neville went white.

"When he wakes, I will give him the potion to drink. Unfortunately, I can't spell that into him like the blood-replenishing potion," she said resolutely, deciding now was not the time to ask Harry how he knew it was the Cruciatus Curse, or even how he knew of the curse.

Harry nodded, looking back down to the potions master.

"I'm going to heal what I can," Harry said, before pausing. "Madam Pomfrey, do you want me to try healing the scar?"

"No, the dittany will do that," she assured.

Harry nodded, stretching his magic out and focusing on the task before him.

Healing the nicks on the ribs was easy, and eliminating the swelling on the back of his head was as well, but Harry paused as he questioned whether or not he should move on to the nerves or not.

:Should we, Coral?:

:We can try reducing the swelling, that should help ease the pain: Coral suggested. :As for the rest . . . I don't know:

:Okay: Harry said, falling back into 'healer mode' and carefully sending a bit of his magic forward to take a firm grasp on the man's magic.

The potion master's magic definitely had a different feel to it than others he had healed. It was rich, thick, and, in certain ways, more powerful than even the headmaster's.

Exhaling, Harry zeroed in on the swelling around the nerves, guiding his mind's eye to show him as much as it could.

It was strange, to say the least. There was swelling around the nerves and the amount varied on the severity of damage. It was worse at the professor's palms and the tips of his fingers. However, that was not what was strange.

Surrounding the majority of the nerves was a thin 'membrane' of magic. Looking closer, Harry noticed that much of the curse residue lay outside of the membrane, but on the other side, against the nerve, there was very little. It was as if the membrane had acted like a screen. Continuing his examination, he found the membrane had been stripped away at the tips of the nerves. There were jagged edges where the curse had been able to fracture and tear away the membrane, allowing it to attack the exposed nerves without any further interference.

Harry healed the nearby swollen tissues, but didn't like the idea of leaving curse residue behind. Unfortunately, he didn't know what to do about that, so, instead, he decided to help rebuild what appeared to be the professor's defense, leaving the residue alone. He figured rebuilding the membrane wouldn't be too hard to do; it would be like rebuilding layers of skin in his mind, and he had done that many times.

Taking a moment to examine the magic surrounding the nerves, he wondered if every wizard had such a defense, and if it rose the split second they were put under the horrid spell. He supposed it was possible; though, Mrs. Longbottom had no magical membrane surrounding her nerves. Granted, perhaps all of hers had been destroyed.

:Membranes, rebuild and strengthen: he stated, slowly, very slowly, easing his magic forward and moving it with the Professor's around the nerves.

Pulling slightly at the existing membranes, he asked the magic to copy the membrane's makeup and purpose before stretching it back and over the bare nerves. Then, like a paint brush, he glided the left over magic he had devoted to the task over the rest, strengthening the protection and reinforcing sections that had begun to suffer wear. Several minutes later, Harry eased back, pleased with what he mentally saw.

:I think that's as much as we can do right now: he said.

:I agree: Coral said.

O o O o O

Dumbledore shifted slightly in the chair beside Severus' bed. It was late, but Albus couldn't bring himself to head to bed just yet. He actually might not head to bed at all.

The castle had been thoroughly searched and there was not a trace of anything to give a hint as to where the intruder had gone . . . or that they had even been there at all, save on the third floor where Severus had confronted them. It was quite frustrating. He had a suspicion the attempted thief had used a secret passage and had somehow covered his presence magically to enter and leave Hogwarts.

He believed the intruder had been Voldemort, but, until he spoke with Severus, he couldn't be certain.

Albus closed his eyes. If he had been a few minutes later in getting to Severus, the young man may have perished from blood loss.

He honestly didn't know what he would have done if he had gotten there too late.

He quietly exhaled, calming himself as he reminded himself that Harry was in the bed beside Severus'. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout felt it best that he sleep in the infirmary for the night, in case he was hit with any more headaches.

Dumbledore turned his eyes to Severus, part of him wishing he hadn't agreed with Madam Pomfrey to let the young man sleep. However, as much as he wanted answers, he knew the young man needed to rest, especially after learning he had been held under a crucio for an extended amount of time.

So that left Albus theorizing what had happened.

Had Voldemort discovered Severus was a spy? Why hadn't he killed him outright? Was it because he wasn't strong enough to cast the killing curse in his current form, whatever it was, and then hurriedly left? Or perhaps he had been punishing Severus because he was unable to procure the stone for him? Neither case made sense.

He put his wrinkled face in his old hand, the image of Severus motionless and crumpled against the wall flashing before his eyes once more.

For a split second, he had thought. . . .

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. It would not do to lose himself while anyone could see, especially a student who was lying in a nearby bed, despite said child likely being asleep.

The back quarter of the infirmary had been cordoned off with a thick curtain. Though it didn't provide as much privacy as a wall, it was easier for Madam Pomfrey to maneuver around and organize the room this way. Also, students occasionally saw the curtains closed, so this wouldn't appear too out of the norm if they passed by the

infirmary and glanced in. Harry and Severus were on the same side, out of view from passersby.

Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey was not anticipating either of them staying for too long. Very likely, if the Potions Master was true to form, he would be up in the morning and grumbling his way back to his own chambers. As for Harry, this was just a precautionary measure for the night.

Dumbledore lowered hand from his face and looked at Severus. Merlin, he could really use some hot cocoa.

"Continue sleeping, my boy. I will be back soon," he whispered softly, giving Severus a gentle pat on his right arm before standing up.

O o O

Harry wasn't asleep. He was actually wide awake, despite the chaotic events of the day. Though, the fact the Headmaster was seated on the far side of Professor Snape's bed also may have had something to do with his wakefulness.

From the cover of his blankets, he watched the Headmaster, and had been since the man had entered the infirmary an hour after Madam Pomfrey had kindly tucked him in.

The room was shaded in darkness, but he could still make out the Headmaster's movements and features. Even from where he was, Harry could tell Dumbledore was troubled, and, if his intuition was correct, it had something to do with the attack on Professor Snape.

Harry was also troubled by what had happened, particularly concerning the cruciatus curse. But he had been reassured by Madam Pomfrey that the professor would fully recover and that his parselmagic had already helped a great deal. Harry tried not to feel too proud about that, but it was nice to know he had really helped the man who had done so much for him in such a short time. He owed him so much.

Harry swallowed, watching as the Headmaster put his face in his hand. It really looked like the old wizard was about to cry. He wasn't sure what he would do if he saw an adult cry, especially the Headmaster. Adults weren't supposed to cry, especially men.

Releasing an internal sigh of relief, he watched as the Headmaster seemed to collect himself, pinching his slightly crooked nose before lowering his hand.

Suddenly, the Headmaster leaned forward slightly and whispered something before patting Professor Snape on his arm.

The action jogged something in Harry's memory, making him recall the odd swelling on the professor's inner forearm.

As his thoughts focused on that, Dumbledore stood, turned, and silently disappeared behind the curtain. He heard the Headmaster's footsteps leave the room.

Harry couldn't believe he had forgotten about the strange swelling on the potion master's arm, but, with everything that had been going on at the time, it had completely slipped his mind. Well, it was probably nothing, but it wouldn't hurt to check and make sure it was gone, whatever it had been.

The Professor had probably just hit something when he had faced the intruder.

Sitting up, Coral stirred.

:What are you doing, Harry?: she asked.

:I'm going to check the professor's arm. I had forgotten to earlier. Want to help?: he asked.

:Sure:

Coral uncoiled from her spot on his pillow and wrapped around his wrist.

Quietly getting up, Harry made his way to the left side of the professor's bed. Normally, he would have felt like he was intruding in the man's space, but right now, in a way, Professor Snape was his patient. It was his responsibility to make sure he was alright.

Slowly, and a little hesitantly, Harry placed his hand with Coral on Snape's left arm, sending a bit of his magic out.

What he had felt before was still there, but, as Harry examined it more closely with his magic, there was a bit more to it than simple swelling. There was a concentration of magic focused there, and it wasn't the professor's magic. It was dark, ugly, and malicious. It felt almost alive.

Frowning, Harry moved his hand and carefully pulled up the professor's sleeve as he turned his arm. Even though the only light was coming from the infirmary windows, Harry's eyes had long adjusted to the low light and could make out . . . something on

the man's skin.

A tattoo?

:What is that?: Coral asked.

It was pale gray and in the form of a skull and a snake. It was a little unclear, as if it had been washed out by something or had been worn away. However, there was a dark misty hue surrounding it all, and it seemed to shift in the dim light.

"It's called a Dark Mark."

O o O

"-my boy. I will be back soon."

Severus remained still and kept his eyes closed as he quickly determined who had just spoken and unknowingly pulled him from his slumber by patting his arm. Focusing on his surroundings, he heard the Headmaster leave the room and could sense there was another individual still nearby.

Relaxing, he concluded it was Harry. It was no surprise. Knowing Pomfrey, she would have wanted him close by in case his scar began acting up again — as it likely had when Voldemort learned Dumbledore had tricked him.

Quickly assessing his injuries, he was surprised he wasn't feeling more of the effects from the cruciatus. Perhaps he had Harry to thank for that. His chest was a little stiff, and he knew that was probably due to the application of dittany, but overall it didn't feel too bad.

A noise to his left suddenly drew his attention.

Ah, parseltongue, and Harry no doubt getting up from his bed. Perhaps he should say something and deter Harry from sneaking off; though, he doubted that was what Harry was doing. Perhaps he just needed to use the loo?

However, why was he now by his bed?

Severus didn't move, wanting to see what Harry would do, though he had to fight really hard not to react when Harry touched his arm through his sleeve.

He couldn't possibly. . . ?

And then he felt the boy's magic seep into him, examining his left arm.

It was utterly surreal when he felt Harry turn his arm and begin to pull up his sleeve, and in that moment Severus was forced to make a split second decision.

Should he reveal he was awake and stop him? Or should he let him see?

In the end, Severus decided to let him see. This secret wasn't worth keeping and perhaps it would help matters later. It also wasn't like Harry wouldn't be able to figure it out on his own already. He had enough clues. Heck, perhaps he already knew.

Opening his eyes, he heard Coral hiss what he felt was a question as he saw Harry staring down at the worst mistake of his life.

"It's called a Dark Mark," Severus stated softly.

Saying that was actually easier than he thought it would be; though, perhaps seeing Harry jump back in surprise helped.

"Professor! I'm sorry, I wanted to make sure — I mean, earlier —" he began, frazzled.

"I'm not angry with you, Potter," he said, sitting up and trying not to wince at the twinge his movement caused to the recently closed wound.

"You shouldn't be moving, sir," Harry said, before swiftly closing his mouth.

Severus smirked and had to fight back an amused smile. "Taking after Madam Pomfrey already, I see."

Harry bit his lip, an action Severus had seen him do many times before when he was thinking or was nervous.

"So the dragon was taken care of, I take it?" Severus asked, turning his arm back over and placing his right hand over it. He couldn't help it. Even though Harry already saw, he was self-conscious about it.

Harry nodded, trying not to turn his eyes toward the now hidden mark. "Yes, sir. Neville and I found her. The intruder had made her huge and she blocked off the entire corridor. But Neville and I handled it. He helped put her to sleep by humming, and I shrunk her back to normal."

Severus could tell that was a very rough summation of what had occurred. He would likely get the more detailed and elaborate version from the Headmaster later.

"Shrunk her back to normal?" he asked, motioning Harry to simply sit at the edge of

the bed by his knees as he shifted over to give him plenty of space.

Harry tentatively came forward and sat on the edge, feeling a little awkward at first, but he got over it soon enough.

"She was only a baby. Hagrid's taking care of her now." Harry smiled. "You know, Hagrid told me he wanted a dragon the first time I met him. I bet this is a dream come true for him."

Severus allowed himself a soft smile, thinking back to Norberta in the future. She had certainly come in handy, and she had remembered Harry. Between her, Harry, and himself, they had been able to hold back over a dozen Death Eaters and four Dark Lieutenants long enough others to flee into the safety of the underground tunnels.

Severus blinked, pulling himself from his thoughts.

"He told you too?" Harry asked, thinking the professor was recalling a conversation with the half-giant and not a battle he had fought in the distant future.

"Not in so many words, but it's widely known Hagrid likes creatures most fear to even approach," he said simply.

Harry nodded, obviously unsure how to continue the conversation as he glanced at Severus' left arm.

Severus fought back a sigh. He turned his arm back over and exposed his mark once again. He trailed his finger down along the inner edge. Harry stared.

"I got it in my youth. I was foolish, young, and afraid," he began quietly. "I was approached by a few people who knew of my potion skills and other abilities. They offered what I thought I wanted. Power and recognition."

"Who were they?" Harry asked in a nearly silent whisper.

"Death Eaters. Followers of the Dark Lord."

Harry blinked, and Severus could tell he was doing his best to work out what this meant in his mind.

"He brands his followers with this. It allows him to call us to him, no matter where he is . . ." he said, before darkly adding, "among other things."

Harry swallowed, but his eyes did not quite hold the amount of fear Severus had

been expecting. There was fear, certainly, but where there should have been more of it, there was understanding and respect.

It reminded him so much of the Harry he had left that he had to look away.

There was a long silent pause.

"I think I understand, sir," Harry whispered. "You don't have to say anymore."

Severus turned his eyes back to him, amazed to see how swiftly the boy was becoming the young man he had come to know and respect in the future. His intuitiveness and gentle understanding had always been there, he supposed, but to see it emerging at this age for himself was rather astonishing. He reclined back against his pillow and pulled his sleeve back down over his mark, but he was not done talking.

"I am in a dangerous position, Potter. In one hand, I hold my life, and in the other, I hold the lives of others. One day I may be forced to choose."

"I think you've already chosen," Harry stated softly. "It's why you came back hurt, isn't it?"

Severus clenched his jaw. The boy's maturity in certain things, particularly in matters of life and death, always took him aback, even in the future. It reminded him that even though the boy was young, he wasn't quite a child, at least, not in the way most people would think he ought to be.

He was about to answer Harry, but he suddenly sensed another presence in the room. He quickly recognized it as the headmaster's. Conscious what he said would be overheard by the man, he chose his words carefully.

O o O

Albus, cup of hot cocoa in hand, quietly came to the infirmary, careful not to make a sound. He didn't want to wake them. Pomfrey would be most displeased if she learned he did.

"It's why you came back hurt, isn't it?" he heard Harry ask as he opened the door.

Dumbledore stopped, for a moment unsure of what to do. He didn't like the idea of eavesdropping, but he also didn't want to interrupt a conversation that was obviously very sensitive. However, his curiosity could hardly be ignored either. And so, he waited in silence and listened.

"He wished to make it appear I had fought him and lost, so the Headmaster would believe my position as spy had been compromised."

"Why would Voldemort want that?"

"I try not to understand the minds of Dark Lords, Potter, but perhaps he believes the Headmaster will now tell me things he wouldn't have before."

"Why would he think that?"

"The Dark Lord has ways of extracting information, even from wizards able to combat unconventional methods like myself. The Headmaster keeps things from me because of this, and it is just as well. If the Dark Lord were to even suspect my treachery, he would interrogate me at his first opportunity, and it would only be a matter of time before he learned everything I knew. This is why the Headmaster doesn't inform me of everything. But even so, I know things the Dark Lord must never discover, and that is why I submit myself to him, even if it is . . . unpleasant."

"What will you do if he ever learns the truth?" Harry asked, his eyes wide.

"I will do what I have been doing all along, Mr. Potter. Fight."

Dumbledore felt his heart swell with pride for Severus.

"The Headmaster was here earlier," Harry stated after the brief pause.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he was sitting by your bed."

Albus really wished he could see Severus, but the curtain was in the way. Well, tone of voice would have to do.

"Is there a particular reason why you brought this up?" Severus asked calmly.

Albus could tell by the pause that Harry was likely unsure of how to continue.

"He looked really worried about you," Harry admitted finally.

Dumbledore could barely keep himself from fidgeting, now seriously beginning to feel bad about eavesdropping, but now he was stuck. If he were to make any noise now, they would learn he was there, and that would be even more awkward. And he wasn't about to risk wordlessly casting a silencing spell. Knowing how sensitive Severus was to magic, that would give away his presence just as quickly.

"The Headmaster holds his staff close to his heart. I suppose, in a way, we are family to him. I'm not surprised you saw him visiting me. He can be rather sentimental, but it is not disagreeable. It is part of what makes him Dumbledore, possibly the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts has ever seen."

"Hagrid says he *is* the greatest," Harry pointed out, a smile in his voice.

Albus could have sworn he just heard Severus bite back a laugh.

"He very well may be, but as I didn't personally know the headmasters before him, I cannot say that he actually is."

"I suppose that's true," Harry agreed.

"You have seen a side of the Headmaster very few see, Potter. The public views him as a powerful icon, like yourself, and much of the Ministry sees him as an invincible leader who can solve their problems. Very few people consider the fact that he is just a man."

"I think I understand."

"You likely understand it better than most, Potter. Now, if we do not want the wrath of Madam Pomfrey in the morning, I believe we should get to sleep."

"Okay, sir."

Dumbledore waited for fifteen minutes to pass after he heard Harry move back to his own bed before he quietly entered, doing his best to appear as if he had just come in.

He looked at Severus, who appeared to have fallen back to sleep, before turning his eyes to Harry. The boy had curled himself into a ball under the covers and had his back to him. Coral was coiled up by his head on the pillow.

With a soft smile, he eased himself into the chair beside Severus' bed and silently sat, sipping at his now lukewarm cocoa. He would happily take the reprimand he would receive from Pomfrey in the morning about staying up all night, for in that moment there was nowhere else he would have rather been.

O o O o O

The school never learned what really happened, although a number of bizarre rumors ran rampant for a few days afterward. The only thing Dumbledore revealed to

the school was the fact there had been a dragon, as Sir Nicholas had stated. He did not confirm or deny there being an intruder or that they had dueled Severus. It was decided the students didn't need to know the details; particularly the fact that the feared potions master had suffered injuries demanding a night in the infirmary.

Unfortunately, the fact Harry Potter stayed the night in the hospital wing had not been missed by the student body. Elaborate tales involving Potter and a giant dragon soon rose to insane heights, and the damage Norberta did to the walls and ceiling only served to strengthen these. Nothing Harry or Neville said mattered.

Harry and Neville quickly became 'dragon tamers' among the student population.

As for Norberta, Dumbledore had quickly made arrangements for travel to her new home — the Flamel's, to the great disappointment of Hagrid, who had only been able to care for the baby dragon for about a day.

All in all, the following week was filled with awed speculation and wonder about Harry and Neville, many wishing to know the 'truth' of the giant dragon in the corridor and how the two first years had managed to subdue it. They didn't believe that the dragon had actually only been an enlarged baby dragon (as Harry and Neville tried to explain). They felt it was a story the staff had told them to say, as it was clear there was more to what had happened than what the professors were admitting.

Eventually though, rumors settled, particularly when the end of the year exams got closer and everyone was scrambling to prepare for them.

However, for the professors, things remained tense. The fact Voldemort had once again been able to infiltrate the castle understandably had the professors worried, and made them eager for the arrival of summer so the wards could finally be improved. But until then, the Headmaster told them to be especially vigilant and to report anything out of the ordinary, no matter how small.

O o O o O

"He tells me his scar is still hurting off and on," Professor Sprout stated with a sigh.

"Perhaps he is just feeling waves of Voldemort's frustration at having failed to acquire the stone?" Filius suggested.

The two of them were in Filius' office off of the Charms classroom.

"I had made the same suggestion to Harry, but he didn't seem convinced that was even a possibility."

"You think Voldemort could be planning something else?"

"How could he not be? Severus had stated the monster mentioned he would go a different route now that the stone was beyond his reach," Pomona continued, now clearly getting agitated. "Oh, I just wish Harry didn't have to deal with any of this."

"He does seem to be coping rather well though," Filius pointed out, trying to be encouraging.

"Yes, he is, despite the whole rumor fiasco with the dragon."

"I know what you mean. And while I agree it was for the best that the students weren't told everything, it can't be easy for Potter and Longbottom."

"Yes . . . 'dragon tamers'," Pomona said, shaking her head.

"The students are certainly not without imagination."

Pomona sighed, slightly frustrated with it all. She felt as if her hands were tied.

"I'm sure this will pass over and become yet another part of Hogwarts' lore," Filius said. "Already, things are beginning to calm. The end of term tests are next week, and even the students know they can't afford to be distracted."

"You're right, Filius. I just wish all my Hufflepuffs only had tests to worry about, instead of Dark Lords, overbearing rumors and the like. It's too much for a child to handle, or anyone for that matter. Have you spoken with Severus at all since it happened?" she asked, swiftly changing the subject.

"Of course, though the conversation was shorter than I would have preferred," Filius said. "But all conversations I have with Severus are short, so it's no surprise."

"He told Harry."

"Told him what?" Filius asked, confused.

"Evidently, Harry had noticed something off about his left arm the night Albus brought him to the infirmary."

Filius' eyes widened, instantly understanding. "So he just told him?"

"Severus stated to me that he saw no point in hiding it. He felt Harry already knew of his position."

"How could Potter possibly know?" Filius asked incredulously.

"Remus."

Filius frowned. "That doesn't seem like something Remus would do, unless. . . ." He trailed off, seeing Pomona nodding.

"Yes, Harry asked," Pomona explained. "I don't know the specifics, but his inquires were enough to make Remus feel he should tell Harry a few things, but only what Harry would be able to find out on his own in public records."

"So Remus saved him the trouble and likely explained it in a responsible manner," Filius reasoned out loud, now not as worried as he had been.

Pomona nodded.

"I suppose it was for the best then," Filius said after a moment. "I do question the wisdom of telling an eleven year old about being an active spy though, with or without there being public records."

"It's why I brought it up with you. I'm fairly certain Harry understands the danger of Severus' position, but I don't quite know what to do to help at all."

"At this time, I don't think there's anything you need to do. Just be there to answer his questions and be honest with him. From what I have been able to see, Potter responds best to complete honesty."

Pomona nodded thoughtfully at that. "Yes, that has been my observation as well. When he first began taking lessons with Poppy, I had been a little concerned. I wasn't sure if he would be able to cope with certain parts of medical knowledge, you understand, but I've seen how Poppy explains things in a straightforward, no nonsense manner, and he seems able to digest it accordingly and with very little embarrassment or awkwardness — unlike others his age."

"That's very good. I'm sure Potter will be able to become a fine Healer when he graduates."

Pomona nodded. "I know Poppy has already begun speaking with a few of her old friends she met at the University and at St. Mungos. I am sure there are already a number of people looking forward to possibly hiring Harry when he is of age — fame aside."

"Yes, I can image," Filius said, agreeing.

"Well, I need to prep the plants for the fourth years' tests next week."

"I need to finish organizing a few things as well," Filius said, hoping down from his seat. "I'm glad we had this little chat. I admit I have been curious about how Potter has been doing in your House. I suspect Minerva has been equally curious."

"I may have a conversation with her later. I wouldn't mind hearing some of her thoughts, as she had known a bit more about James than most. I'd like to know if certain quirks of his have been passed down to Harry or not."

Filius smiled. "Well, from what you have told me, he resembles Lily more than James, but even then, Harry is quite unique. I doubt there has ever been anyone like him before."

O o O o O

Harry pulled the curtains around his bed, deciding to call it a night. The past week had been very busy, studying and taking tests, but he was confident his efforts had been enough to get at least E's in most of his subjects. For History of Magic he would be happy with an A, though getting an E didn't seem entirely impossible. The test had been easier than he had thought it would be. Granted, reading the book during class as Binns droned on and on about some goblin he had already discussed fifty times before probably helped.

:Sleep well, Harry: Coral hissed, curling herself on the edge of his pillow.

:Night, Coral: he said, getting under the covers.

With a sigh, Harry closed his eyes, glad the busy week had resulted in his peers leaving him alone. The rumors and questions about the dragon had finally ended, and the school seemed to have moved on from inquiring about his and Neville's 'dragon taming' abilities. Not that it mattered all that much, as the summer holidays would begin the following week and their fascination with him would likely disappear over the break anyway. At least that's what Ernie assured him.

Harry couldn't really blame the school for being curious, but the incessant whispering and amazed looks were annoying, though, they did distract him from the pain he was feeling in his scar.

It was now nearly non-stop. It was actually getting worse. He had told Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey, but they unfortunately couldn't do much to help. Pomfrey had given him some pain reliever of course, but Harry hated the way the potion made him feel lighter than he knew he should be. He hated the 'floaty' feeling

and actually preferred the pain over it. At least he could endure the pain and ignore it, at least for the most part, and it wasn't like the pain was unbearable, just there. Sort of like a cold sore.

But it wasn't as simple as that, and Harry knew he shouldn't just brush it aside, but at this point there was little else he could do. He also knew he shouldn't allow himself to keep thinking about it, it wasn't healthy, but he did anyway. What was Voldemort doing? What was he thinking about? By the faint traces he was getting from the scar, it certainly wasn't anything good. He was gearing up for something, and it was very soon. It was as if the Dark Lord was eagerly waiting for Christmas morning or something.

Harry only hoped they would be able to thwart him once again whenever he did strike.

On another note, he had gotten back to reading the Occlumency book and practicing the simple exercises. With his school work done for that year, he felt the potions master would approve of his shift in studies.

Harry smiled. He was confident he had done well on the Potions test. When he had turned in his test and potion flask, the side of the Professor's mouth had turned up, ever so slightly, in a way Harry had been able to identify as pride. It was a strange feeling. To his knowledge, he had never made anyone proud before. Maybe he would be able to do it again? He would certainly try!

With that final happy thought, Harry surrendered to sleep.

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Harry grimaced, the pain in his scar mounting to such a degree it had woken him from his slumber. It felt so strong, even stronger than the times when Voldemort had been in the castle. It was thick, so potent that it felt as if the monster was right there in the room. . . .

With that, Harry's eyes snapped open, and he was suddenly aware of Coral right up against his shoulder, her flickering tongue by his ear.

:Something just entered: she whispered softly. Harry had almost missed her words. :I can taste them:

Harry remained still, his heart hammering in his chest as he now sensed a presence just on the other side of his bed's curtains. Harry's eyes turned to the dark cloth, hoping to see something, even though he didn't have his glasses on.

Silently, Harry slipped his wand on his forearm free from his holster just as he caught movement at the edge of the curtain.

A hand.

It was gripping the edge of the cloth, and Harry knew something was going to happen soon. Whoever was on the other side, Voldemort or not, was going to open the curtain, and he had a very strong feeling it would not be good for him.

The curtain was ripped aside, and Harry only had a split second to grab hold of Coral and leap off the bed.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Green light exploded forth, striking right where he had been lying as he launched himself back, falling onto the floor and ripping down the curtain on the bed's other side. The bed was instantly obliterated by the dark spell as the covers fell at his feet, somehow not having tangled around him. Coral was in his left hand as he clumsily threw forth the spell Smith had cast against Draco all those weeks ago.

"*Everte Statum*!" Harry cried, precariously aiming at the blurry dark form on the opposite side of the bed before snatching his glasses from the bedside table as Coral instantly wrapped around his wrist.

The spell was easily deflected by the dark wizard, who seemed to growl in annoyance.

"Can't you just die, Potter? !" he snarled before flicking his wand.

Harry's wand was yanked from his grasp, but before he could react, the wizard thrust his wand at him again.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" he shouted again as Harry's wand clattered to the floor somewhere near Justin's bed.

Harry barely managed to roll behind the cylindrical furnace at the center of the room. The green spell rocketed to the floor and cracked it, shattered stone going everywhere.

With his glasses now firmly on his face, Harry could make out the form in the low light. He was fat, short, and had frightening bright, slitted, red eyes.

"Harry?" Neville cried as Ernie, Justin, and Zacharias shot up from their beds.

"Run!" Harry shouted, now having to squint as the pain in his scar increased.

Justin fled the room, being closest to the door. Smith was petrified in terror on his bed while Ernie wisely took refuge behind the side of his bed. Neville followed Ernie's strategy, falling alongside his bed and taking cover while pulling out his wand. Neville's curtains were not closed, as he preferred them open when he slept.

"You will trouble me no longer, Potter."

"You're the one who's been troubling me — Voldemort," Harry shot back, now hoping to keep his would-be-murderer's attention on himself.

"You are intelligent at least," Voldemort stated, before throwing another spell, this one aimed at Harry's cover and forcing him to flee behind Neville's bed as the heater splintered. "Hiding will only postpone the inevitable." He shot another spell, this one hitting the wall beyond Neville's bed. It missed their heads by mere inches.

Crouching lower, Harry grabbed Neville's arm. "Close your eyes when I head for the door," he whispered urgently as he removed his mother's wand from his calf holster.

Neville nodded, tightening his grip on his own wand.

Voldemort stepped forward. They could hear his feet crush some of what was left of Harry's bed and the room's heater. Voldemort cast another spell, and the bed they were behind launched upward before flying across the room and slamming against the far wall near the door. Neville's side table slid from the wall several feet, but remained upright, stopping where the end of Neville's bed once was.

Harry squeezed Neville's arm in what he hoped would be interpreted as a signal before he dashed forward, his mind no longer trying to work out desperate strategies, but reacting.

"*LUMOS!*" Harry thundered, his voice nearly cracking with his bellow as he slammed his eyes shut and threw as much power as he could into the spell.

"AHH!" Voldemort screeched as the ray of white light, brighter than a flash of lightning, shot right into his face.

Voldemort stumbled to the side slightly as he blinked several times, trying to clear his vision. He was now closest to Justin's bed, to the horror of Smith who was the next closest.

Harry's momentum carried his small form forward, which was unfortunate as he tripped over the debris now covering the floor. He landed with a resounding thud and his head struck a slab of bent iron that had once been straight and part of the heater.

Breathing hard, dazed and now bleeding, Harry looked up as the rather fat Dark Lord roared.

Neville scrambled forward and took hold of Harry's foot and promptly yanked him back, sliding him across the floor as he desperately tried to get them both back behind the closest form of cover, which was now Harry's dilapidated bed.

Voldemort was furious. "I'll kill you all!" he declared as he blindly turned his wand to a random target.

Neville.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

There was nothing either of the boys could do in time. Time seemed to slow and Harry could only watch, from the floor and on his side, as the green beam raced toward Neville's chest.

His eyes widened as he tried to move, tried to kick Neville away, tried to do anything to save his friend, but either from shock, exhaustion, or a concussion, he could do nothing.

But he didn't have to.

From the corner of his eye, he made out . . . something . . . something small sailing forth from the top of Neville's side table and directly into the path of the green beam.

"Ribbit. . . ."

It was over in an instant, and the faint 'plop' of the small shape landing right by his head rang loudly in Harry's ears. All the while, Voldemort was firing spells randomly about the room in some kind of fit, totally having lost control of himself.

"Trevor?" Neville breathed, utterly stunned as he stared down at the first meaningful gift he had ever received laying right beside his best friend's bleeding face.

Harry's heart clenched for his friend, but he knew now was not the time for grieving as he quickly struggled to his knees, scooped Trevor up, and shoved Neville the rest of the way behind the cover they had almost gotten behind.

As their forms hunched down behind the mound of shredded mattress, curtains, and bed frame, Voldemort continued his assault, but his tantrum was soon answered by an unwavering declaration and a powerful blasting hex right at the center of his flabby back.

"PICK ON SOMEONE YOUR OWN SIZE!"

His body catapulted forward, slamming into the wall directly in the path of the door as the room's lights were turned on.

Professor Sprout had arrived.

Harry and the others remained where they were as Voldemort rotated about. He was even more atrocious in the light than he had been in the dark.

Although the overweight man Voldemort was obviously occupying was cleanly shaven, it did little to help his appearance. His hair was wiry, although combed, and despite his dark and sleek clothing, it made him look more like Uncle Vernon attending a funeral than an intimidating wizard.

He lifted his wand, revealing his right hand which was missing the forefinger.

At the sight, Sprout released a quick gasp, before immediately continuing her offensive and entering the room.

With precise flicks of her wand, she launched chunks of debris from the floor at him, forcing him to dodge or deflect them instead of casting as many curses as he would have otherwise.

She was relentless, but he wasn't the most feared Dark Lord since Grindelwald for nothing.

Deflecting the items being magically thrown by Sprout (though many struck him anyway, as he seemed to have been at least partially blinded by Harry's powerful lumos), he brought his hands to his chest. His wand was directly in front of his sternum as he gathered his magic, ignoring a slab of wood striking his shoulder.

"Rah!" he shouted, opening his arms in a terrifying display of magical prowess.

Everything in the room was ruthlessly slammed back away from him, including Harry and the other boys. Fragile items, like glass and pottery, exploded as the pulse of power brushed past them. Harry's glass lenses cracked, but thankfully, due to muggle technology, they remained in their frames. Professor Sprout stood her ground, but had to protect herself from the items tossed about from the wave of thick magic.

And then Voldemort truly went on the offensive.

Harry and Neville stared in absolute horror as he whipped his wand about, and though it was clear he was having serious trouble seeing, his casting ability had not been hampered.

Fire erupted from his wand as a harsh series of hisses came forth from his mouth.

"Boys, behind me!" Sprout cried, dashing forward and sweeping her wand before her with an earnest purpose.

Harry and the others didn't need to be told twice, though Ernie had to pull Smith with him from the bed as they all fled behind Sprout while Voldemort expelled even more flames from his wand and sent it out toward them all.

Harry was the last one behind Sprout, turning as he felt the heat of fire licking at his back.

"Professor!" he couldn't help but cry, alarmed as Sprout simply stood there, the flames rushing toward her.

But she was not idle.

She shifted her stance, swinging her wand in a mighty arc toward the ceiling. A clear dome appeared over her and the doorway, absorbing the heat and protecting them as she swept her wand across again. The fire was slammed aside, being propelled up and back as she thrust her free hand in that direction as well, forcing it into the top, right edge of the room.

Through his shattered lenses and the transparent, conjured dome, Harry was barely able to make out Voldemort's form under the flames as something utterly bizarre happened.

Voldemort was shrinking, and very quickly — transforming into something entirely inhuman.

A rat?

As Sprout continued to battle the flames, they saw the rat scurry to the left wall, where Harry and Neville's beds had once been, vanishing into a hole at the bottom of the stone wall.

Suddenly, Harry felt himself yanked backward, away from the doorway and further into the hall of the dormitory. There were many sounds of movement, but all Harry saw was a rush of colorful robes closely followed by pitch black and a flurry of other robes of varying color and size.

"Get them back, Severus!" a voice, clearly belonging to Dumbledore, shouted.

Harry gasped as someone continued to pull him further away, before they suddenly stopped and applied pressure to the wounds on his face. Blinking, the wadded cloth was shifted so he could see, and he quickly found himself on the floor and in the arms of Cedric Diggory, who had removed his own outer robes and were using them to slow the bleeding.

To his right, he saw Professor Snape's back and realized he had somehow been taken to the Hufflepuff common room in that time of chaotic movement. From the angle he could see, he noticed that the potion master had his wand out, and was blocking the entryway.

He turned his eyes away, trying to see who else was in the room.

He found Smith and Ernie on the couch beside some prefects, who were making sure they were alright. Justin was talking to Professor McGonagall and Neville was kneeling quietly beside Cedric, his eyes falling to Harry's left hand.

Oh. He was still holding Trevor. Coral lowered her head sadly toward the amphibian.

Sitting up, Cedric adjusting the cloth accordingly, Harry raised his eyes and met Neville's gaze.

"Here, Neville," he whispered, gently offering the limp toad to him.

Neville's eyes were already filled with tears as he took Trevor and quickly brought him to his chest.

There were no words to be said.

O o O o O

"It's a beautiful place to have him rest, Neville," Hagrid said gruffly as he gave the lumpy stone a firm hit with his fist to stick it in the earth.

Harry, Neville, Professor Sprout, and Hagrid were behind Hagrid's hut, gathered before the small resting place of Neville's former pet.

They would all be heading home the next day, allowing the Professors to finally begin placing and improving the castle's wards later that week. The attack on Harry by the 'dark wizard' (the Ministry did not wish to confirm it was in fact Voldemort, possession or no) had been made public, as it was impossible to keep it a secret when so many students in the dormitory had heard the curses and Professor Sprout combating flames. Not to mention the completely ruined dorm room. . . . Thankfully, the things in their trunks had made it unscathed. The flames had not had time to burn through them, so things like Harry's invisibility cloak were completely fine, to their great relief. Professor Sprout had also been able to return Harry's primary wand to him, though its handle had been slightly charred. Other than that though, it was undamaged and was still able to be used.

The hours following the attack had past in a blur, being checked over and cured by Madam Pomfrey (she didn't allow Harry to use parselmagic due to the concussion and mild magical fatigue) and questioned by the Headmaster. In the end, they determined the Dark Lord had managed to possess an animagus and infiltrate the school as a rat would — through the crevasses in the walls. Harry suspected there was more going on, but, at this point, he didn't want to know.

Neville sniffled, giving the small gravestone a gentle pat. "I'll never forget you, Trevor."

He stepped back beside Harry, both of them looking down at the stone, which had carefully been engraved by their Head of House.

Here Lies Trevor the Toad

The **U**nexpected **H**ero

Familiar of Neville Longbottom

August 27th 1991 – June 26th 1992

O o O o O

A/N: The dates on the gravestone marks how long Trevor had been Neville's familiar, as Neville wouldn't have known when Trevor had 'hatched'. Also, just in case you're

wondering, because JKR didn't specify when Hogwart's last day of school is, I selected my own (June 28th).

Next part, *Motive*, is under construction.

Motive

A/N: Well, I've hit a bit of a wall, but I've managed to write this much. Enjoy ^^

Questions Concerning:

Harry's Search for Knowledge—It has been brought to my attention by several people (which is perfectly fine) that they feel Harry's self research is a bit beyond his years, so I felt I should address it. Perhaps I was a strange child, but when I was interested in something, I found books and movies about it to learn what I could. Because of this, I don't really find it all that odd to have Harry do this as well. Of course, understanding things one reads at that age is a different matter, and I will be going into that with Harry, but his age is immaterial to wanting to learn about a subject and searching for answers, in my opinion. Hope that explains my reasoning on the matter and reassures those with concerns about Harry's thirst for knowledge.

Harry's 'advanced' Ability in Parselmagic—There are very few parselmouths, and even fewer go into parselmagic, but those who do find healing very natural. I will be going into this very soon, but for now, think of it as relying on instincts rather than medical knowledge alone.

Part 20: Motive

"So, he's going back to the Dursleys," Severus said.

It wasn't a question.

Dumbledore looked up from behind his desk. "He will not be remaining there all summer, Severus, I assure you, but that is the safest place for him, and the wards need to be refreshed by his presence."

Severus had to agree. Besides Hogwarts and a few other places, the wards at Number 4 provided the best protection for the boy — as long as he was in the house. Harry had to ensure those wards remained, Dursleys or no, at least for now.

"Pomona told me you had her inform Potter of the wards and the amount of time needed to re-strengthen them. Three weeks?" The Potions Master moved closer to the desk, but did not sit at the nearby chair.

"It is a conservative estimate, I admit, but as they are the only Blood Wards I have ever placed, I prefer to be cautious; besides, I need time to make the appropriate

arrangements."

"You have decided where he will stay then?"

"I have a few ideas."

"But you're not going to tell me," Severus supplied simply. He had expected it.

"Not yet," Albus said.

"I see. Then he will not be going to the Longbottoms, I gather?" he asked, sort of shooting in the dark, searching for clues.

"No. Augusta has expressed her concerns with me. At this time, I feel it would be . . . unwise to suggest having Harry stay at the Longbottom Mansion this summer."

Severus' eyebrows rose. That did surprise him. He had always thought Augusta was made of sterner stuff. But then, he had only gotten to really know her after Neville's fifth year.

"Understandably, she is quite alarmed by what has happened. It saddens me to admit, but I believe she is frightened by young Harry, and what his proximity means for her grandson."

"She is not forbidding their friendship, is she?"

"No-no, she is stronger than that and would never dream of taking away her grandson's first friend, but I would not be surprised if she began giving subtle suggestions to the boy."

"Hmph, I doubt Longbottom will take kindly to that. He and Potter are as close as brothers."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling brightly, "They are."

At that, Severus finally sat down. "Has the Ministry begun an investigation yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

Dumbledore became still. "Madam Bones has been quite an ally of justice. She's putting pressure on the Minister to go public with it and finally question Sirius Black under veritaserum." Dumbledore sighed. "I knew something was off about Sirius' conviction, but with all the evidence, the boy's own very vocal confession of 'I killed them', and everyone's emotions high right after Voldemort's fall. . . ."

"Then you believe Black is innocent of all counts now?" Severus asked, implanting some surprise and confusion into his voice.

"When Pomona showed me her memory in the pensieve, the mystery came together. I don't know without a doubt, of course, but as Peter has been alive all this time. . . . There is also what Remus revealed yesterday." Dumbledore shook his head in amazement. "Animagi."

Severus allowed himself to appear lost in thought. This could work well.

"Severus?"

"The youngest Weasley boy . . . he had misplaced a pet rat not long before Quirrell. . . ."

Dumbledore's eyes widened, quickly coming to the conclusion, or at least possibility, Severus wished him to.

"If you would excuse me, Severus, I believe I need to speak with the Weasleys," he said.

Severus gave him a soft nod before promptly leaving.

O o O o O

"You think you'll be able to visit this summer?" Neville asked.

"I'm not sure. I hope so," Harry answered.

"Don't forget you can come over to my house whenever you want. Father said he would get the Ministry to set up the floo network to your relatives if you wished," Draco put in. "All you have to do is owl me."

Draco was merely stopping in to Harry and Neville's compartment for part of the ride to the station. Vincent and Gregory were in a different compartment with some other Slytherins.

"Er—I'm not sure that would be a good idea. I'd love to come, don't get me wrong, but my relatives . . . they really, really don't like magic at all. So much so that I've convinced Dobby to stay and help the other house elves at Hogwarts for now. And even though Professor Snape spoke to the Dursleys before Hogwarts, setting up a floo. . . ."

"I see. Well, you don't have to come by floo, you know. There's always the Knight

Bus."

"That's true," Harry said, wondering if he'd be able to visit during the weeks he was refreshing the wards.

"And we'll be corresponding by owl regularly, so scheduling a visit won't be difficult," Draco continued, before pausing. "Your relatives won't get too upset with that, will they?"

"I think anything I do in my room they will ignore, thanks to the Professor, which is more than I ever could have wished for before Hogwarts." Harry grew still, suddenly looking tired.

Draco and Neville could tell there was something more to that statement, but saw Harry would probably never say more.

"Wow, they must be pretty horrible. Stupid muggles," Draco spat. "Why must you stay with them? Surely Dumbledore could have found you a different place."

"Well, for right now, they're the safest place for me outside of Hogwarts. Professor Sprout said it has to do with my being related to my aunt through my mum."

Harry wasn't sure how much he should say. He hadn't been told to keep any of it a secret, but there was Draco's father to consider. . . . Was he being paranoid?

"I suppose that makes sense," Draco said before getting up. "Well, I should get back to Crabbe and Goyle. They promised not to eat all the candy, but they're pretty forgetful."

Harry and Neville smiled, amused.

"I'll owl you when I get to the Dursleys, Draco," Harry promised.

"Very good, Potter," Draco answered, before heading out and receiving a parting nod from Neville.

O o O o O

Sirius Black looked up, hearing something he rarely ever did.

The door to his cell opening.

He looked up, the deep coldness of the dementors having lessened somewhat.

"Stand up, Black. You're coming with us," the guard said gruffly.

He did as he was told, shakily standing. "Wha-what's going on?"

"Don't ask questions. Just do as we say."

Black, utterly confused, but so grateful to be away from the dementors to really care, was taken away.

He wasn't sure if the events that followed were real or not. He had imagined something like this happening soon after he had first been caught; however, with the dementors' constant presence, he had slowly lost all hope. He desperately hoped he would not wake from this hallucination.

O o O o O

Severus folded the Daily Prophet and put it aside.

So it was done. Madam Bones, determined to get to the truth, had done it.

It had taken her well over a week, but she had convinced the Minister and, thanks to Dumbledore, had arranged a trial to be done in front of the Wizengamot — a trial ten years overdue. Fudge was made out to be a man of justice, of course, and Black was the poor victim of circumstance in the past war.

Severus swirled the liquid in his glass as he sat down, the paper on the table falling open to display the front page once more.

SIRIUS BLACK CLEARED OF ALL CHARGES!

He wondered what would happen now.

The Healers, in examining Black, had ordered him to extended bed rest. For good or ill, the man would not be up and around for the rest of the summer. He had, understandably, some serious problems from his time in Azkaban. He would have to endure many hours with mind healers and other specialists. Part of Severus almost felt sorry for the mutt.

He shook his head.

He only hoped this would be a good thing for Harry in the long run. Last time, Black had 'recovered' on his own and had barely managed to keep himself near the definition of sane before getting killed in an ambush at the Ministry. That was soon before Voldemort took control and obliterated everything resembling good in the

wizarding world.

Before Good truly began to lose.

Refocusing, he wondered when Harry would be told about Black. Knowing Dumbledore, it would be as late as possible. Well, he supposed for right now there was no reason to tell Harry. It wasn't like Black was well enough for visitors anyway, and Harry as a distraction would no doubt hinder the man's recovery. Besides, they would be talking with Harry before too long anyway. In about two weeks, he would be relocated to wherever Dumbledore had deemed safe, and, in that time, they would also tell him about his slumbering status.

Severus glanced back at the paper before standing up. Well, time to get back with the other professors and continue improving the wards.

Merlin, he was grateful Albus had listened to his suggestions, especially the last one. Hopefully it would all turn out the way he was envisioning and the oldest Weasley would once again become a helpful ally.

O o O o O

Bill Weasley nervously followed his former Head of House toward the Great Hall. Apparently, his knowledge of ancient Egyptian wards had impressed at least one professor, and he had been recommended, by name, to help.

Bill was still trying to wrap his mind around it. Why had he, who had only just finished his apprenticeship, been asked to help lay new defensive wards around one of the most powerful castles in Europe? Shouldn't the Headmaster be asking a Ward Master to help? Why him, William Arthur Weasley — a young, inexperienced Curse Breaker?

And why had they sent for him now? It was well known that the work on the wards had commenced immediately after term had ended. And that was another thing. The wards had been vastly improved already. He had instantly felt the difference when he stepped foot on the grounds. It was amazing what they had done in two weeks.

Hogwarts had always felt powerful and inviting to welcomed visitors, but now it felt protective and bold. It was still inviting, at least to him, but there was an underlying feel to it all that almost bellowed 'Hurt those within my walls and you will be expelled.'

It was quite intimidating and impressive.

He wondered how the professors had created something like this. Nothing he had ever read made wards feel this way. Though, Hogwarts was very old and had hundreds of wards rooted to her foundation, all of which went toward protecting her inhabitants. Perhaps this newly unified purpose was the reason?

"Severus was quite adamant in sending for you. I do wonder what he believes you capable of," McGonagall said offhandedly as they came to the doors of the Great Hall.

Bill nearly fell. As it was, he stumbled forward and had to stop to keep his balance.

Severus Snape, the bat of the dungeons, the bane of the twins, the most feared and despised professor of Hogwarts, had called for *him*? !

This was reality, right?

"Mr. Weasley, I do hope you intend to follow me into the Great Hall. I would hate to inform the Headmaster and the other professors you were somehow indisposed out here."

Bill straightened, quickly gathering himself.

"Professor Snape was the one to request me?"

"Yes. Albus at first wanted to call for a Ward Master, but Severus would have none of that and managed to convince him of your abilities."

McGonagall stared at him with her keen eyes, clearly wondering herself what had possessed Severus to call for the young man before her, rather than an experienced Warder. Bill himself couldn't blame her.

"I see." Bill swallowed before following her into the Great Hall, McGonagall once again leading the way.

"Ah, Minerva," Albus said, standing up as she came up to the table before looking to Bill. "William, I'm glad you've agreed to help us."

"Er . . . no problem, though, honestly, sir, I feel this may be a bit beyond me at the moment," he said hesitantly.

"Nonsense, my boy. Severus is certain of your abilities, and I trust his judgment," Dumbledore continued, ignoring the glare sent his way from the potions master.

Bill nervously looked to the dark robed spy. "T-thank you for your vote of confidence,

sir."

"You are capable, Weasley, and I saw no reason for this task to be given to any other," Severus stated tonelessly.

Bill blinked, not knowing what to say.

"Well then, let's get started, shall we?" Albus said happily.

"Professors, what exactly . . . I mean, what do you need me to do?" Bill asked. "I gather it has something to do with the wards?"

"Minerva didn't tell you?" Albus asked, actually appearing a bit baffled before turning to his Deputy.

"I decided it was best for you to tell him, Albus. You're the Headmaster, after all," she said.

Dumbledore gave a slight nod in thoughtful agreement before focusing back on Bill. "You're going to help us get rid of a little curse, William. As a Curse Breaker, I believe you are qualified?"

O o O o O

Harry sighed.

Other than the library, there wasn't much for him to look forward to at the Dursleys, and unfortunately even his escape to the library was constrained. He wasn't allowed to be gone for more than an hour, and since the library was a twenty-five minute walk one way, it didn't give him much time to browse or peruse the shelves for books.

But he supposed it was for the best. With kids going missing lately, he figured he should do as his aunt said — even though her concern wasn't for him but what Professor Snape would do to them if anything happened to him.

The kidnappings were on the news almost every day.

So far, eight kids had been taken with no clues as to who the perpetrator, or perpetrators, was or why they were doing this. There were no ransom notes or demands, no witnesses, or disturbances. The other worrisome thing was that it didn't seem to matter if the child was in their home or not. There had been kids taken from their beds, backyards, and neighborhood playgrounds. It was actually pretty scary.

If Harry didn't know better, he would suspect magic, but why on earth would wizards do this? He didn't know a whole lot about the wizarding world yet, but had been able to gather that many wizards didn't feel muggles were even worth their time.

So why kidnap muggle kids?

Harry shook his head, going into the kitchen to fix a quick bit of lunch for himself before he would retreat back to his room and finish looking over the simple anatomy book the kind librarian had gotten for him. He would be going to the library later that afternoon to return the book and get another like he did every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. It had become quite a routine for him. He even left at the same hour. This was because of the Dursleys, of course. Supposedly, this stout routine prevented him from messing up any of their plans. Harry didn't see how that was, but at this point it was just better to go along with their demands. It wouldn't help anyone for him to point out that this routine actually forced them to schedule around him, rather than the other way around, but, whatever.

"The Creeveys called police early this morning when they found their youngest son, Dennis Creevey, age nine, was missing. Police have yet to make a statement, but it appears the Silent Kidnappers have struck again."

Dudley was in the living room with Aunt Petunia and the tv was on the news. Harry paused, curious.

"Like most of the other children, Dennis Creevey was last seen in his bed, after being tucked in last night. No sign of break in has been found and no ransom has been made."

Harry sighed. So now it was nine.

O o O o O

Madam Bones was having a slow day, that is, until a long time friend and co-worker, Kingsley Shacklebolt, gave her a disturbing bit of information.

By chance, he had learned about an odd series of kidnappings going on in the muggle world, as a niece of a friend was one of them. Thankfully, Kingsley had had the insight to look into the matter and discovered something even more troubling.

The children being taken . . . they were all muggleborns, between the ages of five and nine.

He had looked into the Magical Children Archive and learned they were all registered

as future students of Hogwarts, to be notified upon their eleventh year with the letter of acceptance from Hogwarts. The Archive, which could only be viewed if one had clearance, not only showed their name, age, and appearance, but their address and other private information.

But this was not the worst of it.

The Archive had a logbook, showing when it had been opened and which files had been read, and who had viewed them. Mysteriously, where a name should have appeared in the logbook, there was none. Someone had confounded it.

However, there was a date. Someone, on June 20th, just two days before the first child had been kidnapped, had looked at the Archive, viewing thirty files — all of which were on young muggleborn. So far, eight of those thirty had been kidnapped.

"What should we do, Madam?" Kingsley asked her.

"I'm not sure yet, but I think we both agree that whoever is doing this is a very skilled wizard."

Kingsley nodded as Madam Bones paused in thought. He gave her a moment to think.

"Kingsley, I want you to look at the other logbooks of classified information. See if any of them have been viewed around the same day or if any of them have been confounded. If they can get into this information, they might have gotten into other sensitive material."

"You think there may be a connection to the Forbidden Library?" he asked.

"Dumbledore gave us the heads up there, and now someone is taking his future students. I wouldn't be surprised if there was somehow a connection," she said, her eyes meeting his. "Just hurry. There are twenty-two other children out there on this kidnapper's list. I will begin organizing a covert investigation while you check those logbooks."

"Yes, Madam."

Madam Bones gave a quiet sigh as Kingsley shut the door behind him. "Why would anyone want to take young muggleborns?"

O o O o O

After taking a few last minute notes on what he found informative in the book, Harry was ready to head to the library. When he returned, he would write to Draco and Neville, and tell them a bit more about muggle libraries and what book he had borrowed this time.

He had yet to visit either of them for the summer, but it was barely three weeks into the break and, since he would be leaving the Durlseys soon, there was still plenty of time for visits. Or at least that's what he told himself. However, strangely, neither Draco nor Neville had asked about him coming to their homes. He supposed it was because they knew he would have to say no, though it still hurt a little for some reason.

Well, hopefully when the Headmaster found him a different place to stay, he could bring it up with them and visit them later in the summer.

"I'm going to the library, Aunt Petunia," Harry said, stepping into the living room to let her know. "I'll be back in an hour."

She simply huffed and waved him off.

With a shrug, he headed out, already savoring the peaceful walk even before he got off the Dursley's property. Any time out of that house was a blessing.

"It's so nice to be outside," Coral hissed from the safety and cover of his breast pocket, agreeing with his mood.

O o O o O

"What did you find, Kingsley?" Madam Bones asked, looking up from her papers to find her friend looking uneasy.

"We need to contact Dumbledore right away."

"What did you find?" she asked again as she stood, not liking the slight sharpness in his voice that she rarely ever heard from him. This was urgent.

She moved to the fireplace, already preparing to contact the old Headmaster.

"I found one other classified file viewed, and its logbook was confounded too. It was the file on Harry Potter and it was viewed on the same day as those in the Archive."

Understandably, Harry's file had been removed from the Archive a long time ago and placed in its own secure registry; though, it was now clear it was no longer 'secure'.

"Go to the boy's home right away. Go as a salesman or something, just make sure he remains in the house. We can't tip this guy off, whoever he is, and that's assuming he's working alone, which I doubt. I think we have just stumbled upon something big, Kingsley. We can't afford to mess this up."

"I understand. I'll go now," he said, already on his way out as Bones turned to the fireplace.

O o O o O

"Back again, I see," an elderly lady behind the counter said.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry answered, handing her the book he had hurriedly chosen to be checked out.

"Thinking about becoming a doctor?" she asked as she stamped the book's card after pausing slightly at the book's title — *Clinically Oriented Anatomy, third edition.*

"A little. My professors said I should read up on it, since I'm interested," Harry said as she handed him the book.

She smiled. "Enjoy."

Harry returned the smile as he thanked her and quickly headed out. He was pushing it to get back to the Dursleys in the allotted time. Just over twenty minutes left. He would need to jog part of the way to ensure he didn't get scolded by Aunt Petunia. . . .

He headed down a quiet street behind the library, cutting between two office buildings and quickening his pace as he went around a dumpster, the medical book under his arm.

-CRACK-

It was so loud, so close, and so quick, Harry's heart nearly leapt into his throat, but it had nothing on what happened next.

"Gotcha!" It was more of a growl than a voice.

Two powerful arms wrapped around him, and he felt Coral shift against his chest in his breast pocket to avoid from getting smashed by the muscular limbs as an unforgiving yank wrenched him to the side.

A portkey.

Arriving wherever this person had taken him, Harry didn't bother thinking about what he should do, but immediately began struggling with his captor.

"Let me go!" he shouted, kicking and trying to free his arms.

All he got in response was laughter from the man, who was now holding him by his right wrist. The library book fell and landed on the floor with a thud as he quickly became aware of others in the room and an all too familiar sense.

These people, every single one of them, were werewolves. In human form, of course, as it wasn't even night, but he knew they were werewolves. He could feel the curse thick in the room.

Harry froze, raising his eyes to look up at the man who was still tightly gripping his thin wrist. The man was massive and his eyes were entirely inhuman. This man had truly embraced the curse.

"What do you want?" Harry managed, despite his thundering heart.

The man grinned, his expression more feral than human. "More than I can say," the man stated, hoisting Harry's arm up and making Harry have to stand on his toes. "You're such a small thing, you know, but impressive, I admit. Too bad things weren't different. You would have made a good cub."

That didn't sound good, but before Harry could even process anything further, his scar flared in pain and the sound of a door opening echoed in the room.

"You may put him down, Greyback. I daresay his shoulder is about to pop."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. He would recognize that voice anywhere, for it was the same one that had almost killed his best friend.

Greyback rotated about slowly, Harry's toes barely grazing the floor.

"Bring him to me, Greyback," Voldemort stated.

"The deal was that I would get to play before handing him over to you."

"Then by all means, play," Voldemort answered simply, as if he knew he would immensely enjoy what was to come, turning his eyes to Harry who was still dangling in the air.

He needed to get out of there! There was no time to think, no time to even be afraid.

He needed to get away — and NOW!

"Fawkes' Base!" Harry bellowed, trusting in the emergency portkey Dumbledore had given him that was on the necklace around his neck.

The pull was violent, but whether that was because it was an emergency portkey or because Greyback had an unbreakable hold on his wrist, Harry didn't know. The only thing he did know was that Greyback was with him, and furious.

They landed on a hard floor, and the next thing Harry knew was that Greyback was on top of him, snarling.

He felt his wrist crack under the man's powerful grip, before he felt a blow of an open hand slash against his side, the man's nails as sharp as razor blades. Harry cried out as Coral launched up from his pocket, her small fangs sinking into the flesh of Greyback's nose, releasing as much venom as she could into him.

:Don't touch my Harry!:

Greyback lurched back with a howl, but he was not finished with Harry, batting Coral off his face with a merciless swipe.

Harry raised his arms and legs defensively, trying to protect his chest as Greyback brought his arms down once more.

He could feel the werewolf's angry, unforgiving magic pulsing within his mighty form as the man's hand came around his throat, the other coming down onto his raised arm.

Was he going to die?

No, he couldn't let himself die. Not here, not like this, and not now!

Harry snapped his eyes open, his previous flight response switching completely into fight.

"Get off!" Harry roared, adrenaline coursing through him as his magic responded just as strongly.

His eyes flashed white as his magic erupted.

It sounded as if a firecracker had gone off in a large can, followed by a dull roar. There was no bright flash of light or color; instead, it was as if there was a massive invisible ball of fire, creating a clear collection of layered waves in the air as

Greyback was blasted back across the office. He was slammed back so hard that he broke the Headmaster's desk in two.

But Greyback had not given up, nor was he even all that hurt. Swiftly rising to his feet and calling his wand into his hand, a deep growl rumbling forth from his chest, Greyback stared back at Harry, who had barely managed to lift his head from the floor to stare back.

Harry was faintly aware of the portraits yelling, some in anger, others in horror as time seemed to slow.

It was in this moment Harry realized something. He couldn't win this fight. Greyback was stronger, bigger, and faster. Even with his unique magic, he was no match for Greyback.

Harry clenched his jaw, moving his hand to retrieve his wand even as Greyback advanced, all the while knowing he would be too late to produce any sort of defense or counter to the coming assault.

"I will devour you!" Greyback declared, blood dripping from the bite on his nose.

Greyback leapt forward, his wand above his head, ready to cast, as his mouth opened in a terrifying display of brute savagery.

He was in the air, his momentum more than enough to propel him the rest of the way to Harry, but he was . . . intercepted.

There was a flash of green by the fireplace, and Harry could only make out a flurry of colorful movement at the corner of his left eye as . . .

KUH-KUNG!

Greyback was ruthlessly bashed in the side of his chest by an invisible force, and it was soon followed by a head buzzing *bonnnng* and an echoing *crack* as two more spells mercilessly collided into his flying form.

The sudden attack vastly altered the werewolf's trajectory, forcing him directly into the side bookcase, which shattered on impact. Greyback landed with a thud, and he didn't move after that.

Harry quickly turned toward where the spells had come from and found Albus Dumbledore standing just in front of the fireplace, wand in hand and beyond livid. His eyes were the sharpest blue Harry had ever seen, and his magic was rippling in the

air so strongly that is was practically visible.

But the ferocity he had just displayed immediately melted, and if Harry had not witnessed it himself, he never would have thought the Headmaster capable of it.

"Harry," Dumbledore breathed, hurrying to kneel at his side as Coral slithered back to him and wrapped around his good wrist.

"Headmaster, he-he took me," Harry managed, for the moment ignoring his injuries. "But I got away. I used the portkey."

"Don't move, Harry. Poppy will be here soon," he said, gently placing his old hand on Harry's chest as he looked for injuries.

O o O

Albus had to fight down a surge of rage when he spotted blood speckling the side of Harry's slashed shirt. Lifting it, he found the cuts from Greyback, but was relieved to find they were shallow.

"Where did he take you, Harry? Tell me everything," he said, deciding to begin collecting information.

Harry closed his eyes before looking back up. Dumbledore felt his insides tense as he took in Harry's expression. What had happened?

"To Voldemort. We were in a large room. A chamber maybe. And there were others . . . werewolves. I felt them."

Albus was about to ask what had happened there, but was interrupted by Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape running into the office.

"Albus, what's happened here? !" Pomfrey cried, kneeling by Harry's other side and casting a diagnostic charm.

The office was in shambles and the desk and bookshelf were in pieces, but her eyes quickly fell to Harry, who was on his back near the side entrance into the Headmaster's chambers.

Dumbledore forced himself to keep his voice steady as he looked up. "Madam Bones called me to her office to discuss something important, and just as I was leaving to return here, I was notified of the emergency portkey activating."

Pomfrey nodded, prompting him to continue, as she had been notified as well.

"I returned through the floo just as Greyback launched himself from the remains of my desk toward Harry. I intercepted him as swiftly as I could," Dumbledore said, before looking back down at Harry.

Harry didn't say anything, but looked grateful for the Headmaster's actions.

"Let's get you to the infirmary," Pomfrey said to Harry as she healed his wrist with a flick of her wand.

"Severus?" Albus asked, watching as his potions master approached Greyback's motionless form with his wand aimed, just in case.

"He's dead," Severus stated frankly.

Dumbledore frowned. "I didn't cast any lethal spells."

Severus shook his head and knelt down, getting a closer look. "Spells had nothing to do with it. I believe this is Coral's doing," he stated, before looking to Harry.

"I-" Harry began, about to apologize while defending Coral but stopped as Professor Snape moved beside Pomfrey. Coral didn't move, but it was not out of fear.

"Don't apologize, Potter," Severus stated. "Greyback was trying to kill you, and may have succeeded if Coral had not defended you, providing enough time for the Headmaster to arrive. Besides, I daresay Coral has done everyone a favor. Greyback has bitten more people than any other known werewolf. He is responsible for the suffering of many people. If I had been here, I would have done nothing less than what Coral has done."

Harry swallowed thickly, speechless.

"Severus, please notify the Aurors. I will join Poppy and Harry to the infirmary," Dumbledore stated, deciding to ignore the ruthlessness he had just heard from his spy.

Severus gave a short nod as Pomfrey levitated Harry up and followed Dumbledore to the infirmary.

O o O o O

Nicholas patted his wife's hand as they entered the classroom they had been directed by Minerva to wait for Albus in. They would not be meeting Albus in his office that night, as the place had yet to be repaired.

"I knew we should have insisted on him moving in with us immediately," Perenelle Flamel muttered to her husband.

"We can't do anything about it now, but at least the lad will be coming home with us once Madam Pomfrey clears him."

"How much did Albus tell you?"

"Only that he had made it in time to save Harry from Greyback. He briefly mentioned Harry had been injured, but it didn't sound serious. Honestly, I believe Albus is a bit more concerned with the boy's emotional state."

"Well, it's no wonder. The child has been attacked nearly continuously ever since he learned about magic."

Just then, the door opened and Albus entered.

O o O o O

Next part, *Slumbering*, is under construction.

Slumbering

A/N: Well, I've hit a bit of a wall, but I've managed to write this much. Enjoy ^^

Questions Concerning:

Coral—No, she's not dead. I hadn't anticipated my one line of her apparent lack of reaction would cause such concern. She was simply proud and unapologetic that her attack had disposed of Greyback.

Part 21: Slumbering

Severus quietly approached the back end of the hospital wing and to the bed in which Harry was laying. Harry was still and had his back to most of the room, but Severus knew he wasn't sleeping.

Slowly, he came to the side of the bed.

"Potter."

Harry gave a small start, before turning and giving him a small smile. Coral was sleeping soundly wrapped around his healed wrist.

Thankfully, Greyback had not injured her too badly when he had tossed her aside.

"The Headmaster has gone to make the final arrangements for where you will be staying," Severus said simply, before conjuring himself a chair and taking a seat.

"Oh. Do you know where that will be?" Harry asked.

"Not at this time, but the Headmaster has assured me it is a place you will enjoy for the rest of the summer. He has also hinted that, if you truly like it, it may become a bit more permanent."

"You mean, I won't need to stay at the Dursleys anymore?" Harry asked, hopeful.

"Perhaps, as it is clear the Dursleys do not provide the care and safety you need and deserve. They will certainly be hearing from me in the near future," he stated flatly.

"This isn't their fault, sir. I was on my way back from the library when it happened. And they have been giving me enough food and leaving me be."

"Even so, you should never have been in a situation allowing Greyback to even approach you. And isn't the library over a mile away?"

"Well, yes," Harry admitted, looking down before heaving a heavy sigh and turning his head away.

Severus suspected correctly that Harry was finding it difficult to reign in his emotions.

"You feel weak, don't you, Potter?" Severus asked, deciding on a course of action.

Harry bit his lip as he slowly sat up and pulled his legs up.

"You are a child, Potter. And need I remind you Greyback was a werewolf? Fully grown and trained wizards have been hurt by him. The fact you were aware enough to activate the portkey and knew when to fight back the way you had . . . you did very well, Potter. Most adults wouldn't have been able to react as intelligently."

"He was so strong, and fast. If the Headmaster hadn't come when he did, he would have. . . ." Harry swallowed.

"You're right, he would have killed you, but the Headmaster did come." Severus shifted the chair closer to the bed. "I will not try to whitewash reality for you, Harry. I believe it's a foolish thing to do, especially when the truth is right in front of you."

Harry remained silent.

"You will get stronger, Harry. You will become a powerful wizard, and not simply because of your magic ability, but because of your determination and compassion. Never forget those are your strongest qualities."

"Severus is right, my boy."

Harry jumped, turning his eyes to the Headmaster who had just come up behind the Potions Master. Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey were with him.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and conjured a chair beside Severus' before conjuring two more for Pomona and Poppy on the other side of the bed.

"Well now, since you are awake, I'd like to speak with you, Harry," Albus said, moving the conversation right along as he sat.

Harry waited, wondering if they wanted him to retell what had happened, even though he had already told most of it to the Headmaster earlier.

"I have a favor to ask of you, Harry. Nothing big, mind you, I would simply like to procure your memory of this afternoon," Dumbledore said.

"My memory?" Harry asked, confused.

"I have a Pensieve. It allows the user to view memories. All you need to do is think about this afternoon, and I will extract your memory. I will return it to you once we have viewed it."

"Oh, alright," Harry managed, still a little puzzled but willing to go along with it.

"You've already told me what you remember, but this will allow Madam Bones and the Aurors to perhaps find more clues," Dumbledore continued.

"Okay, so I just think of what happened?"

"Yes. The memory will be at the surface of your mind and magic will do the rest," Dumbledore said, taking out a glass vial from his pocket.

Severus gave him an encouraging nod.

"Ready, Harry?" Albus asked, gently lifting his wand and placing the tip at Harry's temple.

"Yeah," Harry answered, before Dumbledore whispered something and slowly pulled his wand away, extracting a silver wisp and swiftly placing it in the awaiting glass container.

"Thank you, Harry. Hopefully with this, and the portkey, the Aurors will be able to track Voldemort down."

"I hope so," Harry agreed.

Dumbledore put the memory aside before refocusing on him. "Harry, there's something else I must discuss with you. It has nothing to do with recent events, but rather—"

"If I may, Headmaster, perhaps it would be easier if I. . . ." Severus paused, realizing he had just interrupted his employer.

"Very well, Severus," Albus said, unfazed. If anything, Severus suspected he was actually pleased for some reason.

Inwardly shaking his head, he cleared his throat and looked at Harry. "Do you

remember what I told you in Diagon Alley?" he asked, deciding that would be a good place to start. "Particularly about the Legacy Spell?"

Harry slowly nodded. "You said you would talk to me about my abilities when I was ready."

"Correct. Well, there is something that we feel you should be told now."

"Okay," Harry said, relaxing slightly, now that he knew this had nothing to do with Greyback or what had happened earlier that day.

"There are different kinds of wizards in the world, some stronger than others — in magic ability," Severus said, glancing at Dumbledore. "The unique cases include Sorcerers, Warlocks, and Mages."

"Few people know this, but I am a Warlock," Dumbledore put in. "I tend to avoid bringing attention to this as most people associate being a 'Warlock' as being 'dark'. Though, I am 'Chief Warlock' for the Wizengamot, but that's more of a title than anything else."

"A Warlock?" Harry asked.

"My magic is stronger overall and better suited to performing advanced forms of transfiguration and combining spells with alchemy than other wizards. This ability, of course, can easily be twisted into unpleasant things, which is why people are leery about Warlocks." Dumbledore's eyes darkened, as if recalling something. "The Wizarding World has experienced the tyranny of many Warlocks in her history."

"Am I a Warlock then?" Harry asked, deciding parselmagic was sort of similar to transfiguration.

"No," Professor Sprout said, causing him to turn to her. "You are what is called a Slumbering Mage. It simply means you have the potential of becoming a specific type of Mage."

"Okay. . . ."

"It concerns your locked magic, Potter," Severus explained. "Once you have learned the proper amount of control, your magic will eventually unlock and you will become a fully realized Mage. An Awakened Mage, to be exact."

"What does that mean exactly?" Harry asked.

"Not much is known about Slumbering Mages, but what is known is that they have the innate ability to manipulate magic beyond the norm. They surpass the magical prowess of all other wizards, but it takes a great deal of work and practice on their part to get to that point — fully awakening their magic," Dumbledore answered.

"We just want you to be aware of what we know, so you will know a little of what to expect as time goes on, dear," Professor Sprout said. "It is going to be a long while before you need to worry about much of what we're saying, but it would be wrong of us to say nothing."

Harry nodded, appreciating their honesty and apparent faith in him.

"So, there's been other Slumbering Mages?" he asked.

"The last known and confirmed one was a child named Abramelino in the 1700's. Unfortunately, he was murdered, and his murder remains a mystery," Severus supplied.

"Merlin is rumored to have been one. Everyone knows he was a Mage, but scholars are still unsure whether or not he was an 'Awakened' one or not," Poppy said, privately wanting to bop Severus. Really, to bring up murder at a time like this? !

"Merlin?" Harry was amazed.

They nodded, amused by his wonder.

"Uh, what's the difference between a 'Mage' and an 'Awakened' one?" Harry asked.

"Well, someone who is born as a 'Mage' has access to all of their magic the moment they are born. It is a unique advantage, and they are naturally gifted in many aspects of magic," Dumbledore explained. "A wizard prodigy."

"So, like a genius?" Harry asked.

"In a magical sense, yes," Dumbledore said with a nod.

"And an 'Awakened' Mage?"

"This is not quite an ideal illustration, but it will have to do. Have you seen those wrist and ankle weights some muggles use to help them get in shape?" Severus asked, earning an impressed glance from Albus.

"Yeah. The neighbor at number seven wears them whenever he runs," Harry answered, wondering what this had to do with anything. "They look pretty heavy —

or at least the ones he uses."

"Now, imagine yourself having weights like that, going throughout your day with them on all the time. It would be difficult at first, correct?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, what would happen if, after years of wearing them, you were to take them off?"

"I suppose things would be a lot easier," Harry said. "And I'd be stronger."

Severus nodded. "When a Slumbering Mage awakens, it is much like someone taking off weights they have been carrying for a long time. Do you understand?"

"I think so, professor, but, I mean, are you sure I'm . . . slumbering, as it's called?" Harry asked, his fascination with it all now fading into disbelief.

"Yes," Severus stated. "What I was shown through the Legacy Spell and what I've seen in the past year verifies it for me."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"From the few documented cases of Slumbering Mages, it is known that there are signs that surface as they get closer to awakening. You, Harry, have already shown some of these," Dumbledore calmly explained.

Harry's eyebrows rose. "What signs?"

"Your control of magic within your body and the bodies of others, for one. Granted, some of that can be attributed to your ability to use parselmagic, but not all of it. You manipulated my magic with ease when you healed my hand before Winter Break. That is quite a feat, as my magic can be rather . . . well, 'domineering' may be the best word. Your ability to calm your accidental magic is another. Few wizards can do what you can so soon after their emotions have gotten the better of them," Dumbledore answered.

Harry looked down. He didn't really feel it was a big deal.

"Well, either way, Harry, we just want you to know what to expect. We don't want your own magic to come as a surprise to you," Professor Sprout said soothingly, patting his hand that was resting on his knee.

There was a brief moment of silence before the Headmaster shifted forward in his

chair.

"Well, the final arrangements have been made for where you will be staying the rest of the summer," Dumbledore said. "Would you like to meet your caretakers now, or after you have rested?"

"Now, please," Harry said, eager to meet the people who very well may replace the Dursleys.

Dumbledore smiled, amused and relieved by Harry's apparent resilience. "I will send them in then."

He stood, quickly followed by Severus, Pomona, and Poppy.

O o O

"Harry, this is Master Nicholas Flamel and his wife, Perenelle Flamel," Dumbledore introduced. "Nicholas, Perenelle . . . Harry Potter."

Nicholas appeared to be in his mid 50's, white peppering his brownish blond hair. He was clean shaven and was shorter than Dumbledore and had broad shoulders. Perenelle was around the same age, appearance-wise, and had her hair in a loose bun.

Harry couldn't help but fidget where he sat.

He was going to be staying with the Flamels? !

"Hello," he said a little shyly, but he held out his hand to shake Nicholas'.

Coral was on his left wrist, gazing at them. They didn't seem to mind her presence at all.

"Nice to meet you, lad. I have heard a bit about you, but I hope to get to know you well for myself during the rest of the summer," Nicholas said kindly.

"We have a room all set up for you, child. We do hope you will like it," Perenelle said happily.

"Thank you. I'm sure I will, but I hope it hasn't been too much trouble," Harry said, a bit awkwardly.

"Oh, don't worry about that, preparing the house has been quite enjoyable. It has been some time since someone has visited our humble abode," Nicholas said with a

smile.

"I will allow you all to get acquainted. I will be in my office," Dumbledore said simply, before quietly leaving the room.

"So, this is the famous Coral," Nicholas said, looking to the small serpent on Harry's wrist. "Hello, madame, I am honored to meet you."

She perked up and gave a short bow. :I think I'm going to like this man, Harry:

O o O o O

Severus was waiting in the Headmaster's office when Albus arrived.

"I've contacted Madam Bones as you instructed," he stated. "She will be here momentarily."

"Very good, Severus," Dumbledore said as he went to his pensieve and pulled out the vial with Harry's memory.

He poured it in as the fireplace flared and Madam Bones stepped out. Thankfully, Dumbledore had had time earlier to repair his office, but the missing desk and side bookcase did make Madam Bones pause.

"Glad you could make it at such short notice," Dumbledore said jovially.

"No problem, Headmaster. I trust this is Mr. Potter's memory of his kidnapping?" she asked, approaching the bowl.

Dumbledore nodded, putting the empty vial aside.

"I have given the portkey to someone I trust in the Department of Transportation. I hope to have the location pinpointed by the end of the day. Hopefully the boy's memory will help us further."

"Yes, I hope so as well," Dumbledore agreed.

"Alright. Shall we then?" she asked.

With that, Dumbledore entered first, followed by Severus and Madam Bones.

They found themselves in a Muggle alleyway and saw Harry hurrying past them with a thick book under his arm.

-CRACK-

"Gotcha!"

Even though they knew Harry was now alright, it was still quite troubling to see Harry snatched by the massive werewolf just before they vanished.

"A portkey," Bones stated as the scene shifted violently.

"Let me go!" Harry cried, struggling as his book fell.

They took a moment to look around the room as Greyback laughed. The room had several people around the perimeter. There were about a dozen or so adults, but what had their attention was the nine children hunkered behind them. Some had bandages on their arms. Bitten.

"Children," Severus breathed, stunned.

"These are the missing muggleborns," Bones whispered. "I recognize some of them from photos we had been given to help find them."

"What do you want?" Harry asked.

They turned back around, finding Greyback staring down menacingly at Harry.

"More than I can say," Greyback said, yanking Harry up and making him dangle in the air. "You're such a small thing, you know, but impressive, I admit. Too bad things weren't different. You would have made a good cub."

"That man truly does disgust me," Albus stated before a door opened beyond them and Harry visibly flinched from a flash of pain.

They didn't need to guess the cause as Voldemort, still possessing Pettigrew, entered the room.

Severus was very tempted to begin mentally calling him Petermort.

"You may put him down, Greyback. I daresay his shoulder is about to pop."

"Merlin," Madam Bones breathed.

"Bring him to me, Greyback," Voldemort stated.

"The deal was that I would get to play before handing him over to you," Greyback

answered, to their horror.

"Then by all means, play," Voldemort answered with a gruesome smile.

Albus' breath actually caught, and Severus' already pale skin went white. Madam Bones looked absolutely sick. Their eyes shot to Harry, who was clearly horrified, his fright so plain it was heartrending.

"Fawkes' Base!" he bellowed.

The scene shifted once more, and they watched as Harry and Greyback plummeted to the floor. They could only watch as Greyback promptly began attacking Harry, the portraits around shouting out in distress.

The crack of Harry's wrist echoed around them as Greyback struck his side, just before Coral launched up from his pocket and latched onto his large nose. But it seemed all for naught, for soon after he had batted her away he went back to his assault, striking Harry again and again.

They wanted to look away, but couldn't as Greyback's giant hand came around Harry's throat. . . .

"Get off!" *Harry roared as he snapped his eyes open.*

The vibrant green of his eyes morphed into a pearly white as the entire room was engulfed in magic.

They couldn't help but jump slightly as a thrum of power reverberated up from Harry himself as the air around Greyback visibly trembled and slammed him back to bash ruthlessly into the Headmaster's desk.

The three adults were all astonished.

Although it was clear it was accidental magic caused by desperation, the sheer strength was mind blowing.

But they knew the fight was not over as Greyback rose up, his own power undeniable as he shrugged off Harry's impressive counterattack. Severus and Madam Bones stared at Greyback, their hatred for him clear on their faces. But Albus wasn't watching him. His eyes were on Harry, who was moving to retrieve his wand, still not giving up in spite of how hopeless it seemed. Dumbledore looked on with a proud, but sad smile.

"I will devour you!"

Madam Bones and Severus could only watch as the memory-Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace and viciously intercepted Greyback in midflight.

Severus was instantly reminded of the few times Albus was truly furious. This had certainly been one of those times; his magic was whirling around him like a thunderous storm.

KUH-KUNG!

Bonnnnnng!

Crack. . . .

Severus didn't bother watching the werewolf's form slam into the bookcase. He was focused on memory-Dumbledore's outraged face. It was one of the most intimidating things he had ever seen. Voldemort was certainly correct to fear this man.

O o O o O

"You can go in now," a nurse said, opening the door for him.

"Thank you," Remus replied, before entering. The nurse shut the door after him. "Sirius?"

The room was dimly lit. The healers had decided it best to keep the light dim around Mr. Black, as the years in Azkaban had been very dark. It would take some time before his eyes would be able to deal with excess light without inducing a severe headache.

"Remus?"

Remus went over by the bed and sat in the nearby chair. "I would have returned sooner, but the Healers said you needed your rest, so I—"

"Remus, you don't need to explain. I was sleeping anyway." His voice was quiet.

"That's good," Remus answered softly.

"I forgot to ask you before. I had been too out of it. Have you seen Harry?" Sirius asked after Remus had gone silent.

"I work at Hogwarts now, as the Defense teacher. I saw Harry this last term." Remus

smiled. "He looks exactly like James, but has Lily's eyes."

"Tell me more. What is he like? Has he done any pranks yet?" Sirius asked, shifting up on his pillow.

"He is very good in magic, particularly healing magic. He is going to be a very powerful wizard some day. He isn't really into pranking, but that may change; though, from what I have seen, I doubt it."

"Healing magic?" Sirius asked, curiously.

While in Azkaban, he had not been told of anything concerning the outside world. If he hadn't been told the year, he never would have even known Harry had started Hogwarts. He didn't know about Harry's parselmagic, the Lycanthropy cure, the events surrounding Quirrell and Voldemort, or anything within the past year. He was completely out of the loop. All he knew was Pettigrew had somehow been found out, and the Ministry had decided to finally carry out a trial, thanks to Madam Bones and Albus Dumbledore.

"Sirius, I want you to listen very carefully, okay? A lot of this is going to be hard to believe, but it's true."

"Alright."

"Harry is a parselmouth." Remus quickly lifted his hand for silence. "Now, before you begin spouting questions, let me continue. Albus believes he got the ability from Voldemort that night, which definitely sounds plausible. Well, because of that, he can do parselmagic."

"Parselmagic?"

"Healing and protective magic," Remus answered before leaning forward. "It's truly amazing, Sirius. He can heal injuries and even destroy curses. Near the start of last term, he saved Draco Malfoy's life, so the Malfoy family now owes him a life debt."

Sirius' eyes widened, knowing Draco was the son of his cousin, Narcissa. "I can imagine Lucius Malfoy was not pleased with this."

"Indeed, but he is acting like a respectable pureblood. The man may be evil, but he doesn't mess with old magic, particularly when it will be his family that suffers."

Sirius grunted faintly.

"And Harry cured me. Mooney is gone, Sirius. Because of Harry, lycanthropy is being cured."

Sirius sat up, stunned. "How is that possible?"

And so Remus told him. He told him about the white magic and how the Potion Master of Hogwarts (he neglected to say who the professor was) discovered how to distribute the cure through blood. He told him how, through Dumbledore, the method was successfully tested on him, and how it felt to finally be rid of the curse.

"That's amazing, Remus. I wish I could have been there to see it."

"Well, there's always pensieves, you know. Albus has one," Remus said with a smile.

O o O o O

Severus set his glass down. The day was finally coming to an end, but he was not ready to call it a night just yet. He had something to do.

Harry had just left with the Flamels, as it was decided the sooner he left with them the better. They had more work to do on the wards the next day, and having a child on the grounds, no matter who they were, was not a good idea. Only those constructing the wards should be present.

He wondered what things the Flamels would teach Harry, in magic and in family. He hoped Harry would benefit from his time with them.

He stood up and made his way to the fireplace and refocused on what he needed to do. He had to succeed in this.

"Malfoy Manor, Lucius' Study," he stated as he threw in the powder and stepped in. . . .

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" Lucius asked, looking up from his desk at Severus.

"Good evening, Lucius," he said simply before stepping in front of the desk. "I trust you recall a previous conversation we had in my study concerning a certain obligation we share?"

Lucius put his quill aside, placing his full attention on Severus.

"Yes, Severus."

"I believe I have a means to . . . alleviate our burden."

Lucius smiled, his grin slightly predatory as his eyes revealed a gleam of relief. "Then, Severus, why don't you sit and share your plan with me?"

Severus didn't take the offered seat; instead, he went to Lucius' bookcase and perused the shelf until his hand came to the top edge where a small, leather bound. . . .

Lucius was the kind of man who believed the best hiding places were in plain sight, as most wizards were too narrow-minded to see what was right in front of them. Unfortunately, Severus was not most wizards.

Lucius stood, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Severus stilled. "He hasn't come to you yet, has he?" he whispered as the room suddenly became very quiet.

Lucius didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Severus turned his head slightly, but kept his hand where it was on the shelf.

"And this is why I have come, Lucius. I have seen him, he is getting stronger, and someday, someday very soon, he will come to you and expect you to choose him over . . . everything." Severus looked back to the bookcase and slowly removed the black diary from the shelf. "I know he gave this to you."

"He did," Lucius stated, his voice very thin, no longer as inviting as it had been when Severus had first entered.

"The Dark Lord doesn't understand Old Magick as we do, Lucius, and he never will."

"You are talking dangerously, Severus," Lucius stated flatly, his eyes glancing down to the book in the potion master's hands.

"The truth is dangerous, Lucius, but with it comes freedom." Severus stepped away from the shelf, his hand clasping tightly around the book's binding. "I have thought about this long and hard, Lucius. I know what he had promised us, but things are not as they had been. We are no longer the same gullible children we used to be. We are men, men with debts and responsibilities."

Severus locked eyes with him, hoping to see the side of Lucius that had been destroyed by Voldemort during the years of war, before the man had been twisted beyond all hope of return.

Lucius remained where he was, his face betraying no emotion at all, but Severus had not given up hope yet.

"You're right, Severus. We are not the same as before, but why do you think I have become a man who will not do the Dark Lord's bidding?"

There was no going back now. After this, either their roles in the coming war would be changed forever, or curses would be exchanged and Draco would lose his father.

Severus faced him fully, unconsciously allowing some of his magic to bleed into the room.

"Because I am such a man. I have seen through the Dark Lord's lies and false promises. Look at this diary. Do you know what it means?"

Severus lifted the book up, his thumb sliding beneath: T.M. Riddle.

Lucius' jaw clenched.

"The Dark Lord is not a pureblood, and neither are all in his inner circle . . . including myself. Do you see the truth now, my old friend? He does not seek to form a Utopia for purebloods, but a throne for himself. And in his quest, he will see to the ruin of the world, both magical and muggle. And his followers will be the first to realize this, as I have already. Will you allow yourself to remain blind in this? Will you condemn your son to this? And what of the Old Magick? You know as well as I do that the moment Potter saved your son's life, Potter's enemies became yours. It is the same truth I should have come to sooner, before I allowed myself to be branded!"

Severus threw the diary onto the floor. It landed cover up with a flat thud. Lucius stared down at it, the golden letters of Lord Voldemort's real name gleaming up at him.

"Will you trust me, Lucius?" Severus asked after a long moment.

"What are you proposing?" Lucius asked, his eyes rising to his once again.

O o O o O

Harry could hardly believe where he was. He was in the Flamels' home!

It wasn't what he had expected; though, he hadn't really known what to expect.

The Flamel's cottage lay near the center of five hundred acres. It wasn't a castle, but it was magnificent. It had four bedrooms, four bathrooms, two offices, a kitchen, a

large living/dining room, a basement, and an attic.

"You can rearrange the room however you like, Harry," Mrs. Flamel, Perenelle, said as he entered, finding his things already waiting for him on the bed.

"I think it's brilliant as it is," Harry said, taking everything in.

"I'm glad you think so," Nicholas said, beaming. "This will be your room for as long as you wish it. Tomorrow, I'll show you some of the grounds, as there's someone who is eager to see you."

Harry turned, confused. "There is?"

Nicholas nodded, but it was clear he wasn't going to reveal anything more. "Tomorrow, Harry, tomorrow. Right now, I think it's time for bed. If you need anything, you can just call us. We're across the hall. Or you can call Phlow if you wish. She's one of our house elves."

"I have one too. His name is Dobby," Harry said. "Though, he's at Hogwarts right now."

"Well, if you wish, you could call him here," Nicholas said. "The other house elves are always happy to welcome a newcomer."

Harry nodded, deciding he might give Dobby the choice tomorrow, after he had slept. He was honestly a little too tired to explain everything to an excited Dobby at the moment.

"Breakfast will be ready in the morning. Do you like orange juice or milk?" Mrs. Flamel asked.

"Um, milk, please," he said.

"Very good," Mr. Flamel said before glancing at the clock. "Well, we will leave you now to get some sleep. It is getting late and Perenelle and I should probably call it a night as well."

Harry nodded, a bit relieved they weren't making a big deal over bedtime. Sure, he was a kid, but he had never been tucked in before and he honestly didn't care to start now. It would be too weird.

They left quietly, giving him the privacy they correctly assumed he desired, content in knowing he would be staying with them for the rest of the summer.

O o O o O

"We sure this is the place?" a black headed auror asked.

"Quite sure," Madam Bones stated, entering the crumbling mansion. "We traced a reliable portkey back to this property and viewed a memory from a witness. This is where they had been."

"Well, they aren't here now," he stated, looking around the dirty place with distaste.

"No, they aren't, but it's clear they left in a hurry," Bones stated, stepping past the auror and into the very same chamber she had seen in Harry's memory. "Look at the floor, there's no dust. This room was clearly used more than the others." She pointed, indicating the clean floors before glancing behind her where the hall was littered with debris and filth.

Turning back, she headed further in, her eyes now fixed on the door where Harry's memory had shown 'Petermort' entering from.

The place had already been searched, but she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy entering a room Voldemort had waited in before Greyback had arrived with Harry.

The door creaked as she opened it, making her recall Harry's memory with even more clarity. Finally, as her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room, she moved forward, taking in the barren room.

"Madam?" the auror questioned behind her.

Bones didn't answer. Instead, she lifted her wand and bathed the room with magical light. She was not about to say the trail had gone cold, not unless it was absolutely and unquestioningly true. There had to be something here. Something to tell her where the muggleborn children were, as well as their captors. She cast a complex revealing charm, hoping it may expose a bit more than footprints on the hardwood floor.

"What is that?" the auror asked, his eyes staring down at the floor.

"The imprint of a large cauldron," Bones answered grimly.

"Merlin, why would they need one this large?"

Bones shook her head. "Nothing good comes to mind."

O o O o O

Pomona sipped her tea before setting it down on the tiny table beside her.

"I really do wish you would take a day or two away from the castle. You haven't had a real vacation since you became a professor, am I right?" she said.

"Oh, I don't mind. I really do like it up here in the tower. Going anywhere else clouds my inner eye. The Headmaster has tried to get me to visit Hogsmeade, but I have reminded him of the feelings I have gotten from the beyond. It is best that I remain here."

"Well, Sybill, if you're sure. I just wanted to . . . Sybill?"

Pomona shifted forward in her seat in concern as Sybill went rigid.

"*The beginning of the end is near! The Dark Lord will take and use the blood of his first enemy, and he will become stronger and more terrible than he ever was. Soon, he will seek to prove his supremacy, instigating a great duel that will shape and forever mark the future of the Wizarding World*. *The beginning of the end is near!*"

Pomona stared, all of the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, were you saying something?" Sybill asked, completely oblivious to what she had just said.

Pomona swallowed. "It's quite alright. I was just saying it is time for me to go. Minerva wanted to see me before dinner."

"Of course. Thanks for bringing the tea. It was quite refreshing."

Pomona nodded and smiled kindly, all the while fighting the urge to bolt from the tower and dash to the Headmaster's office as she made her way out of the room.

O o O o O

Next part, *Blood*, is under construction.

Blood

A/N: Writer's block has been defeated for now. Hold onto your seats, this is going to be a rapid sequence of events. Read carefully. :)

Questions Concerning:

Severus' Future Knowledge—Harry told him everything about Voldemort rising and things surrounding that, but remember I took the liberty of making an alternate future from that of canon. However, Severus' future in my story is canon up to fourth year. Fifth and beyond is different- - - *-reminder-no Horcruxes.*

White Magic—Don't think of it as 'good' magic. It is simply the antidote to Lycanthropy. That is its only purpose. Don't confuse it with Harry's healing magic.

Part 22: Blood

Harry nervously followed Nicholas outside, Coral around his left wrist. He could still hardly believe all of this was actually real.

Breakfast had been light and pleasant. Perenelle made great pancakes and the syrup with it had been smooth and warm. The Flamel's home was comfortable and nothing at all how he thought it would be, not that he had really given much thought to how it would be. However, he couldn't help but be surprised, for it was a place he envisioned kind grandparents living at, rather than two famous alchemists.

"I trust you slept well, Harry?" Nicholas asked as they headed further from the house.

Harry nodded, Perenelle having asked something similar when she had flipped pancakes for him; however, Harry couldn't help but frown when he tried to think back to his dream the night before.

It was strange. He couldn't really remember much of the dream he had had, but he knew he had had one, and an intense one if he could trust his foggy memory. There had been a tangible feel to it, a forbidding sense and a kind of warning that often rung in his ears when Dudley and his friends began plotting. But it had been more than that. Much more.

It had been an urgent warning, a thrum of danger and coming peril.

There had been people and an intense discussion. Talk of some kind of plan and the

mention of blood.

Ergh! If only he could remember more!

"Something the matter, Harry? You're very quiet," Nicholas observed as they went around a hill and entered a field.

"No, nothing. I was just trying to remember a dream," Harry answered.

"Ah, the adventures that leave us when morning comes," he said before stopping at the edge of the field. "And here we are."

"Uh, where, sir?" Harry asked, a little confused. There wasn't anything of note that he could see.

Nicholas tapped his old forehead in self reproach. "Oh, forgive me, I forgot," he said before placing his hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry felt a warm tingle seep from Nicholas' hand and into his skin and couldn't help but jump as a large, stable-like building suddenly appeared before them. It was painted red and brown and had a low stone fence encircling a massive cleared area of dirt on the right side.

"Go on around the side. There is someone waiting for you," Nicholas said with a twinkle in his eye as he gave Harry a little nudge.

Not needing further prompting, Harry hurried forward, opening the low gate of the stone fence and stopping as his eyes took in the building's exposed and open side.

The interior was magically enlarged, throwing off his perception a bit as his mind tried to reconcile the size of the building and the area within it. However, his internal struggle with spatial dimensions was quickly cut short as he took notice of a form within.

"Norberta?" he asked, amazed as he took in her size.

She was no longer the tiny baby dragon he had helped months before, but an adolescent dragon larger than a horse. She quickly spotted him and clamored forward, stopping just beyond rails with a translucent magical shield, and happily clawed at the ground.

Nicholas came up behind him with a chuckle. "She has been quite anxious to see you again when I told her you would be coming to stay with us."

"She was?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes. Dragons are more intelligent than most wizards give them credit for. Though they are still animals and do not have our level of awareness, their comprehension of certain parts of speech and communication is quite impressive."

Harry slowly approached, slightly overwhelmed by her partly reacquired but now genuine size.

:Hi, Norberta: Harry greeted, only to be rewarded by Norberta's deep, happy rumbles.

"We have to be careful with larger dragons, hence the shield, but I will lower it for the moment. She has been rather docile for a dragon," Nicholas said, waving his wand and causing the magical divider to fall.

Norberta did not waste any time. She promptly leapt over the low railing and gently nudged her head against Harry's.

:Nice to see you again, girl: Harry said, patting her nose with his right hand as Coral gave a greeting as well.

Nicholas smiled as he went to the side wall and leaned up against it. "So, how was your first year at Hogwarts, class wise?" he asked, wisely deciding it was not the time to broach the other things that year had involved.

"It was good. I learned a lot. Potions is the best, but Charms and Transfiguration are pretty brilliant too," he said. "I like Defense as well, now that Quirrel isn't teaching it anymore."

"Ah yes, had Albus mentioned something about the DADA class, now that I think about it. Professor Lupin should now be able to continue teaching it next year."

"That's good, but, if you don't mind me asking, why wouldn't he have been able to before?"

"Oh, there had been a curse placed on it years ago," he said offhandedly. "Many believe it was Voldemort's doing. Anyway, the curse prevented the class from being taught by the same person for more than one year. No matter how devoted, something would happen that would prevent an individual from teaching the following year, like an accidental injury, unfortunate death, odd occurrence, etcetera. Albus has been trying for years to get rid of it, but finally the problem has been resolved, thanks to the revamping of the wards and a talented Curse Breaker."

Harry slowed his petting of Norberta, surprised to learn the curse on the DADA position had actually been real. He had heard a few rumors, of course, but hadn't taken them seriously.

"I'm glad that problem has finally been taken care of. I know Albus was tired of finding DADA teachers," Nicholas added with a chuckle. "He had even offered me the job once, but Perenelle outright refused to let me take it so I said no. Poor Albus."

"If there hadn't been a curse, would you have said yes?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"Well, if there hadn't been a curse, I doubt Albus would have asked me, but if he had . . . I don't know, I would have had to think on it. A job like that comes with many things attached, after all. Perenelle and I enjoy our privacy and moderate seclusion from the rest of the world. That would be lost if I agreed to work at Hogwarts for any length of time."

"I suppose that's true," Harry agreed.

"I had been a teacher once, though, centuries ago," Nicholas said after a moment, his voice quieting as his eyes grew sad. "But my student was taken from me."

Harry, sensing the anguish of the old man, turned and faced him fully, Norberta now standing stoically behind him, her head directly above his own.

"What happened?" he asked.

"He was taken from his home one day in the fall and we found him a week later by a lake." Nicholas gave a pained sigh before smothering it. "It was a long time ago. I've accepted it, but I still wish I knew who had done it."

Harry nodded softly. "What was your student's name?" he asked, unable to hold back his curiosity.

Nicholas' eyes shined brightly with a proud and happy memory. "Abramelino. I first met him when he was seven years old. He had displayed a powerful burst of accidental magic, so was brought to me by a friend who knew his family."

"Abramelino? Yesterday, Professor Snape. . . ." Harry trailed off, his eyes growing wide.

Nicholas nodded, seeing where Harry was going. "Yes, he is the one and the same. The last known Slumbering Mage, before you."

Harry blinked, totally at a loss of what to do or say.

"When Albus asked if we would be willing to care for you this summer, he did not inform us of your mage status until after we agreed to have you. So let me assure you you're not here because of what you are, but because we wanted to experience something we haven't yet and because you needed a safe place to stay. However, I'm sure part of why Albus asked us was because he knew we had some experience in this sort of thing and would be able to help you if you needed it," Nicholas explained before pushing off from the stable wall. "And allow me to let you in on a little secret. I'm not just a wizard either."

Harry's eyebrows went very high now. "Are you a Mage too, then?" he asked eagerly.

Nicholas smirked. "No, I'm a Sorcerer."

O o O o O

Neville was fuming. He didn't understand his grandmother. Why was she being like this? All he wanted to do was ask Harry over for one night, that's all!

Why was she doing this? Why was she refusing to allow him to have time with Harry?

Did she not think he was a good enough friend for Harry? Did she think Harry was too powerful a wizard for him, Neville — an ordinary wizard, to be friends with? She must, and maybe she was right, but for whatever reason, Harry had chosen him to be his best friend. He had told him as much last year. Harry had chosen *him*, no one else, to be his good friend, his best mate, and Neville would rather be thrown out a window again than toss that friendship away.

Well then, he would just need to keep the friendship in spite of his Gran, who was obviously trying to undermine his amity with Harry. He wasn't dumb; he could see what she was doing. The subtle comments, the obverse remarks about Harry and their camaraderie. She was trying to make him rethink their friendship.

Pfft. As if that was going to happen. Harry was his first friend ever, and though he had made other friends that year, like Susan, Justin, Ernie, and even Draco, Harry was by far his closest friend.

Gran was going to be sorely disappointed if she thought he would give up on it so easily. . . .

Though, unbeknownst to Neville, it would someday be quite the opposite. When she realized her foolishness, she would be exceedingly proud of him.

O o O o O

Severus closed his eyes, leaning back in his desk chair. He had just returned from a staff meeting, though it barely had anything to do with the school or the coming term.

The recent prophesy made by Trelawney echoed in his ears, and though the words he had heard had been recited spoken by Pomona, he could easily envision the batty divination 'teacher' stating it stiffly in her painfully flowery chair.

"*The beginning of the end is near! The Dark Lord will take and use the blood of his first enemy, and he will become stronger and more terrible than he ever was. Soon, he will seek to prove his supremacy, instigating a great duel that will shape and forever mark the future of the Wizarding World*. *The beginning of the end is near!*"

Well, that boded well for the future, Severus sneered.

He shook his head, knowing little good would come in agonizing over the prophecy, though he did have some ideas as to the implications of its words and couldn't help but attempt to process them.

'Blood of his first enemy'. . . .

Severus was quite certain this 'first enemy' was not Harry. Voldemort had hated others before Potter had even been born, after all. Dumbledore, perhaps? He had been one of the first, if not the first, who had noticed something off about the Slytherin heir. However, even if the Headmaster turned out to be 'his first enemy', that didn't answer how Voldemort was going to get a hold of his blood.

With a sigh, he shook himself, trying to fight off the feeling that he was overlooking something very important.

Well, whatever was coming, he would just need to be ready and face it. However Voldemort would obtain the blood wasn't all that important, what was was what he would do with it. With a grimace, Severus mentally listed the options the Dark Lord would have if he got a sample of Albus' blood.

The prophesy said he would become stronger, so strong that he would be confident enough to want to prove his power that would lead to some great duel. Severus doubted the Dark Lord would ever be that confident in Peter's body, even with increased power, which meant he would have to get a new body or alter Pettigrew's

to such a degree that it would be entirely different. Which . . . was frighteningly easy with blood taken from a powerful wizard. . . .

A sinking feeling gathered in Severus' gut.

Bone of the father. . . .

Severus swallowed, his eyes widening.

Deserting his desk, Severus quickly left his chambers and headed to a place he should have visited months before.

Little Hangleton Graveyard.

O o O o O

Healer Smethwyk made his way down to the floor where St. Mungo's Blood Bank was. A man bitten by a lone werewolf had recently come in from Wales and needed a dose of the vaccine. He was certain a day would never go by where he wasn't amazed by the existence of such a cure. White Magic was a miracle. He sighed happily and stepped from the elevator, only to halt in shock.

The entire floor was in shambles. People were sprawled out throughout the hall, smoke coming in from a side room. The room that housed the Blood Bank.

"Help!"

"We need some help down here, hurry!"

"Call the Aurors!"

"What happened?" Smethwyk cried, hurrying toward the first injured person before him.

"Two men, I think. They just ran down here and starting firing spells. Blasting curses mostly. They went straight for the Blood Bank and obliterated it. The protections couldn't endure their assault," a man answered, coming to his side as he assessed the injuries of the assistant healer on the floor. "Then they ran out and disappeared. They were inhumanly fast, and I mean that. Inhuman."

"What do you mean?" Smethwyk asked.

"They were werewolves," the man stated, meeting his eyes.

"What?"

"I saw their eyes. They had 'embraced the wolf.' Trust me, they were werewolves."

Smethwyk frowned as he looked beyond the man. The Aurors had finally arrived.

O o O o O

Severus apparated at the edge of the graveyard, quickly taking in the area around him.

The sun was setting; it was quiet and no one else was around.

Pleased by this, Severus made his way past the gravestones and to the stone statue residing over the grave of Tom Riddle Senior. He glanced above the graveyard and shrugged off a shiver at seeing Riddle Manor. There were no lights on, and gave no hint to anyone being within.

Refocusing, he came to the grave of Voldemort's father and waved his wand over it.

The earth rose up easily, cut from the ground like a slice of pie. Putting it aside, he pointed his wand at the crumbling casket and opened the rickety lid.

And there, in the capsule of rotting wood, was a tattered suit with dirt and grime, but that was all. . . .

The body was gone.

O o O o O

Albus stepped back from the floo.

Over a firecall, Bones had just told him what had happened at St. Mungos and that she had begun an investigation.

Five people were dead. The explosive spells used more than enough to cause grievous injury to those unfortunate enough to have been nearby.

The Blood Bank was a total loss, which meant the hospital would need to get more blood donations from those who had been inoculated with white magic, such as himself. However, the two assailants had not only ransacked the Blood Bank, but had left a message.

'WE DON'T NEED A CURE! LEAVE US BE!'

Fudge and the other political morons were already yammering about it, no doubt preparing to lay down more laws and regulations, rather than think about who was actually responsible and why.

Even if he hadn't heard the recent prophesy from Trelawney, Dumbledore would have known this was a ruse. If this was truly outraged werewolves bent on refusing the cure and fighting it, why would they attack now? Wouldn't it have made more sense if they had attacked much sooner? Like when St. Mungos had begun organizing the process of accepting donations and giving out the cure and not months later when the werewolf population was down by a near 90 percent?

Dumbledore shook his head. Obviously something more sinister was going on, and he was certain it involved the prophecy . . . after all, a vial of his blood was in that vault.

O o O o O

Madam Bones was not happy. Couldn't the Department of Magical Law Enforcement ever catch a break?

She honestly wasn't sure if her department would be able to pull of what the Ministry expected of them, but she also knew, if they didn't do it, no one would.

First, there was the investigation of Voldemort (which had started near the end of 1991), trying to discover his whereabouts and plans. Then there was the one concerning Peter Pettigrew (started in June 1992), but his had quickly become part of the file on Voldemort — Petermort.

The next (Spring 1992), involved Marx parchment and the 'Bone Eater' curse, which was quickly joined by the break in within the Ministry (Summer 1992), where someone had managed to gain access into the Forbidden Library and classified files, such as the Archive that held the addresses of all the known muggleborns. This then spilled over and grew into the nightmarish investigation on the kidnapped muggleborns, which had then prompted her to begin setting up safety measures for the muggleborn families.

Even now, a few of her Aurors were going house to house, introducing the world of magic to the head of the household and giving them a means to contact them, just in case. So far, setting up the precautions was going rather well. With any luck, if the kidnappers struck again, they would be able to catch them and prevent other children from being taken away from their families. Bones was also hopeful, if they succeeded in catching a kidnapper, they would be able to find the missing children and bring them home.

The attack on Potter was filed with the information they had gathered on Voldemort, although it was clear the event was also tied to the kidnapped children.

And now, on top of all of that, was the destroyed Blood Bank.

Madam Bones sighed. There was just too much going on. It was very difficult to make any sense of it.

However, after the firecall to Albus Dumbledore, she was now quite certain the destruction of the Blood Bank was about more than just a few troublesome werewolves, just as she had suspected.

She didn't really bother with prophesies much, but this one, she had to admit, was quite alarming and should not be passed off as mere divination nonsense.

"Madam Bones?" Kingsley asked, knocking on the door as he entered her office.

"Yes, Kingsley?" She glanced up from her paperwork.

"You need to see this," he stated, holding out the report on the Blood Bank.

She took it and pushed up her reading glasses to skim the pages as he waited in silence.

Muttering a curse, she put the report down.

Every single vial and pint of blood, though broken and unusable, had been accounted for — save one.

Albus Dumbledore's.

O o O o O

"Lucius?"

Draco paused in the hallway, hearing his mother's voice in the library.

"Severus stopped by for a moment," his father stated.

"And he left so quickly? He usually humors you by eating a cracker at least," Narcissa said lightly, though her voice trailed off at the very end.

"This was not the time for such pleasantries, Narcissa."

Draco pressed himself against the wall, the tension in his father's voice so stifling it physically unnerved him. He had never heard his father so . . . scared.

"What's happened, Lucius?" she whispered.

"He fears the . . . Dark Lord may be . . . moving."

"What do you mean?"

"You recall what I had told you about our previous discussion, and what we had agreed to do if the Dark Lord ever regained his full strength?"

His mother didn't verbally respond, but Draco was certain she had given a tentative nod.

"Severus suspects it may be sooner rather than later."

Draco held his breath, wondering what his parent's expressions currently were and what this 'agreement' had entailed.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked softly.

"Be ready to leave the country at a moment's notice. I want to know you and Draco are safe, whatever happens. You can't leave now, obviously, but be ready to leave in case you receive the sign to do so. As well as my own, Severus has precautions in place to alert you if things become . . . dangerous."

"Alright."

There was a long pause, although Draco could hear his mother's uneasy breathing.

"I'm sorry, Narcissa. I should never have gotten our family into this. I should have chosen differently. We are purebloods; I should have chosen a more honorable path."

"Shh. . . . What is done is done. We have a son now, our beliefs and priorities are no longer what they were before."

Lucius gave a long sigh.

"Yes, but I think I have been trying to convince myself otherwise, until recently. You know, when the Dark Lord fell, a part of me was relieved, even though I relished the power he had given me."

"I was relieved as well. Aurors and blood traitors were not the only ones dying. Our friends were as well, like Evan Rosier. I feared . . . Draco and I would lose you."

"I hope you will not experience that fear again," he whispered.

"If things are as Severus says, surely he has thought of more than the plan you told me about," Narcissa asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, he has, but he hasn't given me specifics."

"What has he told you, then?"

Draco could tell his mother was becoming impatient. She often did when stressed or worried.

"That in the end it will be up to Harry Potter, and that we must ensure the boy is up to the task and that his way is clear. Severus told me no one else can kill the Dark Lord but Potter."

"You're serious," she breathed.

Draco didn't blame her. It was up to Harry? His friend who cured werewolves, who healed those he didn't even know? How could they expect Harry to kill anyone, even if . . . no, *especially* if it was the Dark Lord?

"Why?" she asked.

"I do not know, but I have never seen Severus so sure about anything in my life. We must help him. Old Magic has dictated it."

"Old Magic or not, it is Honor that has truly dictated it, Husband," Narcissa asserted.

"Perhaps," Lucius conceded.

Draco didn't move for a long time after that, his parents now silently sitting in the library.

He didn't know what to think or do.

Voldemort was going to regain his full power, and soon? What did this mean? What would happen? Was his father right? Was his Godfather? Was it truly up to Harry, his friend? Were things going to be like the first war? Would people begin dying again?

Quietly and slowly, Draco headed back to his room, very uncertain of the future.

O o O o O

"Severus, *where* have you been?"

Severus turned to find McGonagall hurrying toward him. He had just made it back from a few serious errands so was not in a very good mood and, by the look of McGonagall, he could tell his sour mood was about to get worse.

"Never mind, Albus wants to see you. Something's happened," she continued, clearly distressed.

"What's happened?" he asked, stepping alongside her as they hurried to Dumbledore's office.

"Albus' blood was stolen from the Blood Bank at St. Mungos!" she blurted.

Severus didn't bother to try and muffle his frustrated curse.

"When?" he asked.

"A few hours ago. Madam Bones just got back with Albus over the floo and told him what they had found from sorting out the mess." McGonagall shook her head, her Scottish accent coming through more than usual. "Where in Merlin's name were you, Severus?" she asked heatedly, apparently deciding she wanted an answer this time.

"I was doing some research," he stated as they made it to the gargoyle.

Minerva hissed out the password and they headed up. "Well, I hope your research was worth it."

"It was," he answered with a cold look.

Really, he couldn't help it. He was trying to contain frustration, anger, and fear, but most of all . . . self-loathing. He should have seen this coming. He should have gone to the graveyard sooner, taken the bones, swapped them out, *something*; but, instead, he had believed he had had time, thought Voldemort would act as he had last time (to a certain extent). He was a fool. Voldemort wasn't a Dark Lord for nothing. Things were very different now. The wizarding world knew he was out there already. He had no reason to tread as lightly as before. He would be the Dark Lord the future had feared much sooner now. He would be ruthless and erratic, and who knew what else with Albus Dumbledore's blood in his veins . . . though, he supposed it was better than having a Slumbering Mage's. . . .

"Severus?"

Severus blinked, suddenly finding himself in the middle of the Headmaster's office and facing the concerned gaze of Albus Dumbledore.

"Yes, Headmaster?" he asked, trying to appear calm and collected.

"Are you alright, my boy?" he asked.

Severus nodded, while Minerva beside him looked annoyed.

"Really, Albus, it's your blood that's missing! We should be asking *you* if you're alright," she stated. "Who knows what they're doing with it. There's too many dark rituals they could be implementing as we speak!"

"There was only enough blood taken for one ritual, Minerva," Albus calmly pointed out.

"Oh, well let's just have a party then!" she said sarcastically.

"Headmaster, I believe I know which ritual the Dark Lord may choose to . . . implement," Severus said, for the moment ignoring the Gryffindor Head of House.

Dumbledore gave him a nod to continue.

Severus calmed his raging heart and forced himself to inform them of his 'recent discovery'. "I believe the Dark Lord is going to attempt to create a new body for himself."

"What has led you to this belief?" Albus asked. McGonagall was silent.

"I went to Lucius Malfoy's this evening and did some research there. And now, after going to the cemetery in Little Hangleton, I'm certain he means to go this route."

He didn't need to tell them he had gone to the cemetery first or reveal what he had really been doing at the Malfoys'.

"And what route is that?" Albus asked, his voice as smooth as glass.

"Bone, Flesh, and Blood from Father, Servant, and Foe to Renew—"

"Revive and Resurrect," Albus broke in, closing his eyes.

Severus wasn't all that surprised that Dumbledore was familiar with it, but

McGonagall was.

"You know of it, Albus?" Minerva asked, her voice very quiet. "What is it exactly?"

"'Blood of the Enemy forcibly taken'," Albus whispered, his eyes calculating.

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus stated.

Minerva looked back and forth between them, wanting to know what was going on.

"I fear you are correct, Severus. Voldemort has likely chosen this route and will regain his form through this. Through my blood."

"Is there nothing we can do?" Minerva asked, not willing to give up so easily.

Dumbledore began to shake his head, but his eyes suddenly shot to his spy, who was now clutching his left arm.

Not asking for permission, Albus stepped over and yanked Severus' sleeve up.

"Oh, Merlin," Minerva breathed.

The mark was darkening right before their eyes.

O o O o O

"*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe,*" the newly promoted werewolf leader recited, pouring the entire vial into the massive cauldron, turning the boiling slop within completely white.

Kamalia Rendall stepped back, avoiding Pettigrew who was rocking in a drooling stupor with his stump of an arm.

Slowly, a form began to rise from the cauldron. . . .

Voldemort savored the moment as he felt air touch his new skin.

"Robe me," he stated.

Ardolf Lowell, Kamalia's lieutenant, stepped up, clothing him as requested.

Taking a deep breath, Voldemort looked down at himself. He grinned.

In Riddle's eyes, his new form embodied the perfect wizard. It was a form that would

bring fear to his enemies and awe to his followers.

He examined his hands. The pale skin seemed to glow with power and his wand hand felt eager to cast.

To those present, his form was magnificent and utterly terrifying. Although thin, he did not appear frail, but strong and agile; in fact, he looked a lot like he had before his fall, with short dark hair and arguably handsome features. But there was one big difference. His eyes.

They were as red as blood.

Kamalia Rendall and Ardolf Lowell knelt down before him as the other adult werewolves there followed suit. Pettigrew hurriedly bowed as well, his unintelligible grunts breaking the stillness of the air.

"Come, Wormtail," he stated as Kamalia handed him his wand.

Pettigrew lifted himself from the ground, seemingly oblivious to his missing limb, his eyes vacant, like a doll's.

"Hold out your arm," Voldemort ordered.

Pettigrew held out his left arm, boldly displaying the Dark Mark.

Voldemort placed the tip of his wand on his servant's tainted skin, calling his followers.

O o O

"He's calling," Severus gritted through his teeth.

"Should you go then?" McGonagall asked.

"I must. He would not respond well if I did not."

"Then go, Severus, but take this portkey, just in case," Dumbledore said, handing him a small metal seal to attach to the back side of his watch — out of sight but always against his skin.

Severus looked down at the item in his hand, wondering, not for the first time, what he had changed to make Albus so much more cautious than before, not that he was complaining. Perhaps it was the safety necklace he had given Harry? Perhaps. . . .

Attaching the emergency portkey to his watch, he gave his mentor a thankful but solemn nod.

"I will return as soon as I can," he stated as he went out the door, set on the task before him.

O o O o O

Next part, *Duel of Duels*, is under construction.

Duel of Duels

A/N: First, allow me to thank my helpful beta readers who helped stop writer's block . . . Throckmorton, Chereche, and Lord Purity. Thank you three for enduring my o.O moments and helping the ideas flow ^^ Forgive me for not formally thanking you all sooner.

Alright, now, I received several concerns/complaints about the things below, but before I answer them, let me point out this is an AU story. As I've said before, I've taken a few liberties, such as giving magic a few different 'natures', altering the severity/circumstances of the war in Severus' future, and the like.

Questions Concerning:

Blood not 'forcibly' taken?—Although Dumbledore freely donated his blood, he specifically gave it to St Mungos with the intent and purpose for it to be used to help cure Lycanthropy, not rise Voldemort. Also, Voldemort still obtained it through his agents, taking it by force from the Blood Bank—hence, the ritual is still valid.

Voldemort's Appearance—This is due to Dumbledore's blood. As Dumbledore himself said, his magic can be 'domineering' (Dumbledore is a Warlock after all). Being used in the ritual, it 'sensed' Voldemort's desired self image and molded his form a bit to that liking. This is part of the consequence of using Dumbledore's blood — instead of using Harry's, which (in Severus' future) had given him Lily's protection and the power of a Slumbering Mage.

Ease of breaking into Blood Bank—The Blood Bank was in the hospital, and, being a hospital, anyone can enter the building itself. That said, the Blood Bank did have protections, but the Ministry did not anticipate such an aggressive (and explosive) attack. This is the Ministry we are talking about. When have their defenses ever been adequate against a powerful and assertive enemy?

Why things have accelerated—In canon, it had been stated a few times that many of the Death Eaters had believed Voldemort was truly gone. Well, when the Ministry made the incident concerning Quirrel public knowledge (mainly that Quirrel was a follower and serving Voldemort's spirit) the slightly more devout Death Eaters went to seek him out and found him. Also, because of the Lycanthropy cure, blood thirsty werewolves were quick to join him, believing him to be their only hope to remain as they are.

Severus forgetting about Riddle Sr's bones—Give the guy a break. He has future information spanning 9 years stuffed in his head *and* has to deal with current events

(the attacks on Harry are distracting!). No one is perfect. Not only that, but (as I will touch on later), he knew Voldemort had to receive a body some time. It is just unfortunate that he had not been able to prevent Riddle from rising so early.

Length of Story—I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to make it, but it will stretch beyond Harry's second year at the very least. Honestly, I haven't given it serious thought yet. There's many things in the plot I need to organize and think through. Can you believe I rarely outline beyond the next two parts? Anyway, just know I'm processing things and have yet to decide when the end will be exactly. Also, let me assure you all that I know Harry isn't even a teenager yet, so don't bring up maturity issues and how unlikely it would be for Harry to duel Voldemort to the death as he is. I already know this.

Well, hopefully that has cleared up a few things, and I hope you all enjoy the action filled part below ^^.

Part 23: Duel of Duels

Severus arrived at the designated place. It was a warehouse, on the outskirts of a muggle town, a town Severus knew.

Severus smashed back the memory of the charred village devoid of living people as he made his way to the side door of the rickety structure.

He risked glancing to his left, finding the lights of the village glistening brightly against the night's darkness. It had been there, on those streets, where Minerva had fallen. He and the others had arrived too late, and she had been too stubborn to flee. She had chosen to stand her ground and hold back the vengeful flames of the fiendfyre for as long as possible to allow others to escape. She would have succeeded too, if it hadn't been for Bellatrix.

Quelling the risen rage within him and placing a wall as thick as a mountain in front of his emotions and thoughts, Severus entered.

The area before him had been cleared of all muggle things from the warehouse, but in its place were molten remnants of a cauldron and a tall thin man standing at the edge of it, facing an assembled group who were predominantly made up of guilty faces. Evidently, the Dark Lord had already given his irate speech about loyalty and faithful followers and had reprimanded them.

Moving forward, Severus surprised himself. He had thought he would have to focus on keeping his heart from pounding loudly against his ribcage; instead, he was

having to keep his eyebrows from rising in surprise.

Voldemort had hair.

If the situation were not so serious, he may have even been amused, but there was nothing funny about the glint in the Dark Lord's red eyes.

"Ah, Severus. My faithful one has come," Voldemort said, turning to him as he waved his pale, thin hand toward him.

Severus went forward, keeping himself from hurrying or being too slow. He had to show the proper reverence after all, especially as it was obvious he was the last to arrive (not to mention late).

"My Lord," he said, kneeling a pace from Voldemort's feet. "I have been anxiously waiting for your return. I apologize for my tardiness."

Severus knew better than to ask for forgiveness or to give excuses.

"Rise," Voldemort said, pleased and saying nothing about his late arrival.

Severus was grateful as he stood, keeping his posture completely submissive. Voldemort motioned him back, and Severus joined the rest of the group.

"So, my Death Eaters," Voldemort said. "As not all of my followers have been idle, we have some things to do tonight, and, perhaps those of you who have disappointed me will begin to repay your unfaithfulness."

Many people about nodded eagerly.

"Kamalia, Ardolf," Voldemort called.

Severus frowned. He knew those names, of course, but they had not joined the ranks until much later, as they were werewolves under Greyback and had not allied themselves with Voldemort until after the destruction of Hogsmeade.

Kamalia Rendall and Ardolf Lowell came forward and knelt before him. "Yes, Lord?" they asked.

"Select a few addresses Yaxley acquired from the Archive and, each of you, take three of my Death Eaters. It is time to show the Wizarding World my power. Leave no survivors in these residences."

They quickly created two groups before standing at the ready to depart to the homes

of muggleborns.

"We will free our friends tonight and gain powerful allies before I reveal myself fully." He paused and looked to Kamalia and Ardolf's groups. "And who knows, perhaps I will have some fun before paying a visit to the Ministry," Voldemort hissed mysteriously before turning to Severus. "Severus," he said. "I want you to return to Hogwarts. You were able to regain my approval and know of the coming attacks on the mudbloods. Warn Dumbledore of them. I want no aurors or blasted Order members interrupting my other plans."

"Yes, my lord."

"Now, the rest of you, come with me. Tonight, we show why I, Lord Voldemort, am to be feared!"

O o O o O

Nicholas hurried down the hall toward Harry's room. The wards had reacted to an intense influx of magic mere moments ago and he knew, instinctively, something was very wrong.

Perenelle was right on his heels as they made it to Harry's door. Not bothering with pleasantries, he slammed the door open and hurried in.

Coral was right by Harry's side, hissing up a storm, clearly worried and agitated.

Harry was hugging his knees and pressing himself against the bed's headboard while tightly holding his eyes shut.

Nicholas could smell bile and glanced at the side of the bed on the floor. Whatever had upset Harry so had caused him to lose his dinner. With a sympathetic grimace, he waved his wand at the floor, vanishing it, as he made his way to the bed.

"Harry?" Nicholas asked softly, lifting his wand now lit by a silently cast *Lumos*.

Coral slithered out of the way but continued hissing at Harry, as if trying to get his attention. It didn't seem to be working.

Nicholas came to the side of the bed and touched Harry's knee while Perenelle stood back and allowed her husband to decide the best course of action, for now.

Harry startled, squinting his eyes open. Nicholas could tell he was in some kind of pain.

"What's wrong, Harry?" he asked.

"Bad dream, and my scar, it hurts." He closed his eyes again and pressed his palms against his face with a moan, his entire form trembling.

Nicholas frowned, quickly moving his free hand forward and prying Harry's hands away.

"Let me see, Harry. Let me help," he stated. "What did you dream?"

"Voldemort. Something's happening. We need to warn them . . . we need to get them out!" Harry said, his previously pained and sluggish speech quickly becoming urgent and strong.

"Just calm down. I need to help you before we do anything," Nicholas said firmly as Perenelle approached as well. "I think I know what is happening."

"He's going," Harry said, not really paying attention to what Nicholas was saying as his breath caught. "He's going to kill people. Please, Mr. Flamel, we need to do something!" Harry gasped, squeezing his eyes shut as a hot wave of pain flashed in his scar and a surge of dark thrill rushed through him. He grabbed at Nicholas' wrists as he shuddered.

"Focus on my voice, Harry. I need to dampen this connection if we are to help anyone. I need you to try to ignore everything else right now."

Harry clenched his teeth as Nicholas placed his right thumb over Harry's scar and closed his eyes.

"You are feeling Voldemort's emotions, Harry. I am going to muffle the connection now, so try not to fight me. This is going to feel quite odd," Nicholas warned.

Nicholas muttered the spell, guiding his magic forward, ignoring the greasy feel of the foreign power leaking from the scar and pressing against Harry's magic. Choosing to be deliberate rather than gentle, he entered Harry's mind. He knew his intrusion had not felt pleasant, but he knew time was of the essence. Harry's young mind could only endure so much concentrated ill-will.

"Harry, I want you to help me if you can. Give me your magic to use here; otherwise I'll be fighting your magic as well as this intrusion from Voldemort."

With that, he heard a faint "Kay. . .' in the boy's mindscape.

Confident in what he had set out to do, Nicholas went to work, cloaking Harry's mind with his magic and using the lad's as reinforcement. This protection would not be Occlumency shields, but they would be the next best thing. Instead of being like castle walls, this would act as a moat. Anything attempting to get into Harry's mind would be slowed, weakened, and distorted.

Finished, he eased back, finding Harry's slumped form against his chest and his wife offering her assistance.

"Thank you, my dear," he said as she helped lay Harry back.

Harry wasn't unconscious, but he was dazed and exhausted.

"You did well, Harry," Nicholas said. "The connection is still present, but it should be muffled now."

"I will floo Albus, now, Nicholas," Perenelle said, hurrying out of the room.

Harry blinked heavily, fighting off sleep; all the while a faint pain echoed in his scar and a weak feeling of sinister elation seeped into his senses.

O o O o O

Voldemort relished the feeling of flight, confident this would not take long.

He was right.

Upon arriving on the island of Azkaban, the Dementors immediately yielded to his presence before swiftly freeing all those within Voldemort desired.

Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, Mulciber, and many others rejoined his ranks and claimed new wands he had previously procured for them. And then it got all the sweeter when the Dementors joined his side, deserting Azkaban prison to follow him to richer feeding grounds.

It was a glorious moment, and he was eager to continue on to the next stage of the plan.

He was back, and ready to show the world.

O o O o O

Mal Turner was a reasonable man with respectable endeavors. He loved his wife

and his son, so when some weirdly dressed people showed up at his residence (which resided near the heart of London in Westminster) last week, he was quick to grab a weapon. However, thankfully, it turned out that his precautions were unnecessary, no matter how strange the visitors had first appeared.

After proving magic was real and they weren't (completely) mad, they had had a long and in depth conversation. He was still trying to wrap his mind around most of it, but he did take a few of important things away from their disclosure. His four year old son was a wizard. Well, that certainly explained a few of the bizarre events over the years, particularly the ice cream sundae that refused to get any smaller, no matter how many bites were taken. His boy had been three.

But the visiting wizards had also disclosed other things — unsettling things — such as the recent kidnappings involving a crazed group of werewolves targeting young 'muggleborn' children. With that bit of news, he had immediately set up a few of his own precautions once the 'aurors' had departed, even though they had given him a magical coin to contact them if something happened.

One could never be too careful, as Mal was about to prove.

Mal sat up, hearing a bell he had rigged to ring under his bed if the front room was breached. Never underestimate the ingenuity of pulleys and strings!

"Honey," he whispered, waking his wife. "Someone has opened our front door without setting off the alarm system. Get Matthew and get to the safe room. I'll handle this," he stated before his wife hurried to their boy's room.

His training from the military was in play as he took out his pistol from the drawer beside his bed and squeezed the coin that that Shacklebolt fellow had given him, before pocketing a second clip into his PJ breast pocket.

Hopefully help would arrive before things got too ugly.

Heading toward the front room, he stayed low and listened. There were people in his house, all right, and they were moving quickly. He only hoped his wife and son were well on their way into the safe room.

Suddenly, he ducked around the wall and entered the kitchen, the sound of movement now very close.

"*Bombarda*!" a cruel voice shouted, blasting down the wall.

Mal rolled under the kitchen table as the debris showered down and his wife's

favorite dishes shattered across the linoleum.

"Show yourself, we know you're there," another said.

There were at least three of them. He could see their robes despite the darkness.

He answered.

With gunfire.

BANG-BANG-BANG!

The first shot clipped one in the shoulder. The second hit an arm, and the third struck another right in the eye — that man would not be getting up again.

Spells rained down upon him, and he barely managed to turn the table on its side for cover as he felt himself being slammed back by it and into the cabinet behind him.

"That little piece of—"

BANG-BANG!

Mal was not out of bullets yet and he did not miss taking out the fourth wizard who had just come around the corner; however, he did not see the other that had appeared on the other side.

"*Crucio!*"

Pain coursed through him, stronger than anything he had ever experienced. It was sharper than a stun gun, rougher than being shot, more violent than a car crash, and longer than any pain should be.

The only thing that made it worse was that he couldn't control his body. He spasmed as the pain grew heavier and heavier.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-click-click . . . click.

He was out of bullets.

Finally, the pain ended, and he looked up to find a man standing over him.

A man with red eyes.

O o O o O

The Headmaster apparated to Westminster soon after Kingsley alerted him that a family there had sent a distress signal. It was very likely the attack was still in progress.

He didn't need to look far to have this verified.

He heard four loud bangs over a man's echoing screams coming from the home to his left. He didn't hesitate to run in, the front door ajar, even as he heard sirens in the distance and the cracks of arriving aurors.

Silently casting a disillusionment charm on himself, he went forward, knowing the aurors outside were now placing a perimeter. Continuing in, his eyes adjusted to the low light as he made his way through the front room.

Suddenly, he stopped, finding a scene all too similar to ones from the last war.

Voldemort standing over a trembling muggle.

"Think you are brave, little muggle?" Voldemort hissed.

Dumbledore eased forward, noting the two motionless bodies just outside the destroyed kitchen. He couldn't see much else beyond that except Voldemort and the pinned muggle, as he only had a direct line of sight to the Dark Lord and nothing else in the kitchen.

Suddenly, the sound of fighting echoed in from outside. Evidently, there were more Death Eaters and they had just engaged the aurors.

Voldemort smiled, not at all bothered by the arrival of opposition.

"Kill any one you see! We shall have a bit of extended fun here!" he declared to the remaining Death Eaters before looking back to the man on the floor. "Avada Ke—"

The old Warlock summoned the microwave from the nearby countertop, bashing it into Voldemort's arm. And then, rushing through the newly created hole into the kitchen, he spotted more Death Eaters and immediately sent a barrage of spells at them.

Keeping his disillusionment charm up, it was easy pickings, but Voldemort was not about to allow his advance to continue unanswered.

Voldemort swept his wand about, gathering his magic before releasing it violently.

The massive pulse of raging magic blasted the entire front half of the house. It was

all Dumbledore could do to remain on his feet and not follow the splintered boards and walls into the street as his disillusionment charm fell.

Knowing he had to get out before the top portion plummeted down, he followed Voldemort out of the rubble, hoping the muggle man would have enough sense to get out on his own and find a safe place.

Charging out onto the street, they were confronted by the last thing they expected.

"FREEZE!"

On the right side of the road were police cars, all with spotlights glaring onto their robed forms. Voldemort lazily waved his wand at the closest car. The two policemen taking cover behind the car doors were slammed back as their patrol car morphed right before their eyes.

The huge snake reared up before turning its attention on to the cops. All the while, Aurors and Death Eaters dueled throughout the long street and on the lawns and rooftops.

Horrified, the police opened fire on the snake, annoying it more than anything else.

Dumbledore fired a spell at the snake, freezing it in place before canceling Voldemort's spell entirely. The car plummeted onto the street, yards in front of the police line as he blocked an incoming spell from Voldemort.

"You would protect these pitiful creatures, old man?" Voldemort asked as he fired another spell, one Albus dodged, allowing it to strike a parked car behind him. "Let's see how well you protect them from each other!"

CRACK-CRACK

Voldemort disappeared before appearing on top of the roof overlooking them all.

"*Imperio, Imperio, Imperio!*"

Dumbledore's blue eyes widened as three policemen turned their guns toward their fellow officers. Triggers were pulled.

Albus reacted as quickly as he could, but he was not fast enough.

BANGBANGBANG!

Two public servants instantly lost their lives before Dumbledore was able to disarm

them with a wide expelliarmus. Several guns clattered to the ground before Dumbledore fired three stunners in quick succession.

Understandably now in shock, the police wisely began pulling back with their casualties to allow for the arrival of the SFO units (Specialist Firearms Officers) who were already en route. However, the police's attempt for escape was halted by spells from blood thirsty Death Eaters who had just recently received their freedom. The cops ducked behind their car doors, although that only provided minor protection, before returning fire with their pistols.

Seeing this, Dumbledore apparated to the top of the previously transfigured police car and flicked his wand in the direction of a front lawn before casting a shield charm over himself to block a gray spell just fired from Voldemort above.

Shrugging off the dark energy that cascaded down his silver shield, three huge forms came forward from the yard to his left and advanced quickly toward the horrified police. Suddenly, green spells were fired at the officers from nearby Death Eaters, but the animated garden gnome-giants intercepted them, protecting the astonished officers.

Voldemort was not amused by Dumbledore's advanced spell-work and unleashed a fiery serpent from a conjured firestorm to show his displeasure.

It was even larger than his transfigured one; its head was above the tops of the trees and its coiled body covered the street in front of two homes.

Voldemort laughed.

Dumbledore swung his arm up to deflect the fiend's bite, but was forced off the vehicle as a result. Rolling to one knee, he thrust his wand forward and up, gathering the entire mass of fire and forcing it to rise above him in a gigantic fireball before blasting it right back at Voldemort.

The sphere of fire exploded just beyond the roof, barely singeing the Dark Lord's robes as the dying flames rose high above the neighborhood in an ominous mushroom cloud before dissipating.

In pure pandemonium, spells continued to be exchanged between the Death Eaters and Aurors dueling one another, while the police shot back at the bolts of light being fired upon them.

Voldemort stood proudly at the edge of the roof, enjoying the destruction below him as Dumbledore took the opportunity to quickly stun two Death Eaters in view.

Suddenly, a loud beating sound came from behind Dumbledore, high above the roof tops.

"*DIFFINDO*!" Voldemort shouted, slashing his wand toward the sound.

Dumbledore turned, not sure what Voldemort had just cursed, just in time to see the tail of a flying machine careen into a nearby tree as monstrous spinning blades with some sort of capsule beneath them plummeted from the sky, twirling horrifically. There were people inside.

Albus stepped forward, dodging spells from a few Death Eaters hoping to land a lucky hit as he threw a well aimed spell at the ruined sky machine, halting its decent with a powerful *immobulus*. It bobbed slightly in the night air as he was forced to defend his back from a crippling curse from Voldemort.

With a silent apparition, Dumbledore appeared on a neighboring roof before catching the sliced helicopter once more and gently setting it onto the street; however, its part in the duel was far from over.

Voldemort summoned the blades, snapping them from the top of the fuselage and swinging them toward his First Enemy.

Albus slashed his wand before him, transfiguring them into silk ribbons before whipping them around right back at Voldemort. Voldemort deflected one of the silver ribbons, but the other three wrapped around his dark form like boa constrictors. He nearly toppled over the side of the roof before he managed to aim a precise *diffindo*, freeing himself.

The Dark Lord sneered, blasting a bolt of lightning at Dumbledore who redirected it into a tree. The tree split down the middle and the crack of thunder and exploding wood echoed through the neighborhood as more vehicles approached . . . this time pouring out SFOs, part of Scotland Yard's specialist firearms unit, CO19.

Voldemort vanished and reappeared loudly on the street in front of Mal Turner's damaged home, as if daring the better equipped muggle police to do something about his presence. For good or ill, this sudden move did cause the fighting around him to pause.

"SURRENDER, YOU'RE SURROUNDED!" an officer who had just arrived bellowed, choosing to ignore the three giant-gnome sentries nearby.

"Surrounded? I don't think so, but it is time to move on," Voldemort stated, his tone informing Dumbledore the eventful night was not over.

Dumbledore apparated onto the street, deciding his best course of action would be to follow the Dark Lord directly to his next target. He had to prevent any more damage from occurring. Too much had been lost already.

It happened quickly. A lightning strike may be considered easier to follow.

Voldemort began to twist to disapparate as a completely unexpected shot rang out from the destroyed house of Mal Turner.

Mal had reloaded and was livid.

The first bullet did not miss before Voldemort vanished into thin air with a loud, bold CRACK. Dumbledore hurried forward even as Mal continued firing furiously into the black mist Voldemort's sudden departure had left. Waving his wand before him, Dumbledore conjured a foggy magical shield to deflect the projectiles coming at him. Bullets ricocheted into the road and curved around him magically, though the foggy shield thinned as he began casting at the area Voldemort had just vacated.

Latching onto the Dark Lord's apparation trail, knowing he only had one chance to get this right, he rotated on his heel as the foggy shield faded further, not knowing where he would reappear as Mal emptied his clip with one last single . . .

BANG!

Albus felt a sledgehammer-like force strike the side of his brow as an explosion of light overtook his vision.

CRACK!

Dumbledore vanished, leaving behind only a splatter of blood on the middle of the muggle street.

O o O o O

Reports were coming in from everywhere. It was pure chaos and there was no sign that it would slow or stop anytime soon. If anything, it was getting worse.

Madam Bones had already sent out three-fourths of her task force to the locations hit. Unfortunately, they had yet to get much information about any of the attacks. All they did know was that magic was being cast in plain view of muggles, and likely *at* muggles in most of those places. The International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy was in serious danger. The only fortunate thing was that this was occurring in the dead of night instead of broad daylight. Hopefully the cover story of there being a

powerful terrorist group setting explosives in neighborhoods and such would work. So far, the muggle authorities 'in the know' agreed to stick to that and contain the truth.

However, what was worse were the reports coming in of dementors on the loose, which only led her to believe Azkaban had been gravely compromised.

Suddenly, alarms blared over their heads.

O o O o O

Dumbledore fell to his knees as he tried to shove the painful throbbing away. He knew he had been hit by a bullet. He had been struck once before, in the 1940's. It was a memorable sensation.

He shook his head, feeling blood running down around the side of his head and into his beard.

While finding Voldemort's trail, he had not been able to fully maintain his bulletproof spell; however, thankfully, it had still taken the brunt of the force, acting like a Kevlar helmet. It still bloody hurt though, but he knew it could have been a lot worse. He also had a feeling he had his innate magic to thank for lessening the damage further, but by how much, he wasn't certain.

Vaguely, he couldn't help but wonder where the bullet was now. Had it landed on the street he had just left? Had it fallen into the layers of his robes? Or, dare he imagine, was it lodged somewhere under his scalp, or worse? Pushing such random and rather grotesque thoughts away, he was fairly certain he had, at the very least, a concussion.

Forcing himself to take in his surroundings, his eyes focused a bit, allowing him to quickly realize where he was.

The Hall of Prophesy.

Comprehension dawned in his pain-clouded mind. Voldemort had come for the prophecy.

Suddenly, he looked up to find a blurry figure several shelves away who could only be Lord Voldemort. He was on his way toward the prophecy. In fact, he was only a pace away.

"Ah, Dumbledore," Voldemort said, turning slightly as he stretched his hand out

toward the prophecy. "A little worse for wear, I see."

His red eyes seemed to gleam as they took in the gaping wound near Dumbledore's right temple.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed as Voldemort's bloody hand closed around the prophecy.

He reacted.

"*Rumpere!*"

With a great sweep of his wand, a wave of penetrating sound rushed forward, shattering every single piece of glass in its wake. All of the orbs in front of Dumbledore crumbled, ghostly figures rising from them, including the orb in Voldemort's grasp.

Instantly, the entire hall was resonating with a sea of voices. Not one could be long distinguished.

"They will be bold and—"

"The world thirsts for—"

"—Death will be waiting in—"

"—knows not—"

"—is a master of none but—"

"Life of the peacemaker shall—"

"—beware of the wiles of liars—"

"—the power to—"

"—dark seeker and war maker—"

"He shall be hated but will only love—"

Voldemort was enraged, having failed to make out what was coming from the ghostly woman in his hand.

He threw curse after curse at Dumbledore, holding nothing back.

Dumbledore forced himself to his feet, expertly weaving the spells he could away from him while dodging or physically blocking the unspeakables with yet-to-be-broken orbs on the shelves beside him.

"Crucio!" Voldemort screamed, only for his spell to be intercepted by an old prophesy.

"It shall come to pass, a child of lust and lost hope—"

"Avada Kedavra!"

"The son of a noble and a father of a shepherd—"

Voldemort had had enough. Rage fueling his actions, he threw his hands up, failing to hide a flash of pain the sharp movement had caused as he summoned the glass fragments and began gathering them all up in front of himself.

Dumbledore flicked his wand forward, pressing his magic into his wand, even as a dull pain behind his right eye began to mount. And then he let the spell go.

A mighty beam of power surged from his wand, striking the mass of glass.

The glass warped, twisting violently, the sound of grinding glass slipping into a sloshing echo. The glass became liquid and now appeared to be a spherical, molten mirror.

But Dumbledore was not through. Fighting through an odd growing fatigue, he jabbed his wand forward before yanking it back hard.

The liquid orb fell, being jarred from Voldemort's control, splashing loudly onto the floor and shelves.

Finally, it settled, and Voldemort, like Dumbledore, had conjured a bubble around himself to prevent the melted glass from touching him.

"I will not leave here with nothing," Voldemort snarled furiously, before disappearing with yet another CRACK.

Not about to just let him go when it was clear he was not finished, Dumbledore apparated forward before latching once more onto Voldemort's trail.

He vanished with a faint crack.

O o O o O

He felt a rush of hateful magic coming right at him and dived to the side just in time.

Apparently, Voldemort had anticipated Dumbledore would be right behind him.

Deflecting another curse, Dumbledore quickly took in his surroundings.

He was in a large room. The lights were on and there was a motionless body of an auror beside the fireplace at the far end of the room. Papers were scattered all over the floor. This was the Minister's office.

It is getting really hard to concentrate, Dumbledore mused absently as he looked to Lord Voldemort and Cornelius Fudge behind a large desk.

"Albus, help me!"

Voldemort was holding the Minister like a shield while pressing the tip of his wand into the bumbling man's neck.

"Are you so determined to stop me, Dumbledore?" Voldemort asked.

"I would have thought that was obvious by now, Tom," Dumbledore answered.

Voldemort sneered before he smiled maliciously. "You can't stop me," he said, digging the tip of his wand into Fudge's neck.

Fudge choked back a sob before giving a whimper as Voldemort seemed to make shushing noises in his ear.

"Now, now, Minister, if I had wanted to kill you I would have already," he said soothingly.

Dumbledore remained where he was, remarkably calm considering the situation and his injury. He also took note of how Voldemort seemed to be favoring his left side.

"Please, what do you want?" Fudge asked, on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Ah, I simply wanted to show that I have returned. I am not an enemy of true witches and wizards, Cornelius. Aren't you tired of how tainted blood has become in recent years? I have."

"Tainted blood, Voldemort?" Dumbledore asked, his words slurring ever so slightly as he selected a plan of action despite his muddled mind. "I recall your father, Tom Riddle, was a muggle. A muggle your squib mother named you after."

It got the desired effect.

In a fit of unrestrained fury, Voldemort banished Fudge to the side toward the door and charged Dumbledore, his eyes glowing bright-bright red. Fudge landed with a dull thud before scurrying to the door and rushing out of the room, horrified.

It was just as well, for in that moment fiendfyre poured from Voldemort's wand like a vengeful demon, its rage matching the red of Tom's eyes. It expanded in intensity, growing and growing until . . .

CRACK!

Voldemort was gone.

There was nothing for it, as Dumbledore knew he couldn't simply leave and let the fire escape the room. With the amount Voldemort had called, it wouldn't be easily contained if it reached the halls.

So he sealed the room, casting the same spell Severus had used to ensure the poison from the Black Death spell wouldn't spread to the rest of the school. And so, the fire could not escape and neither could he.

He held the fire back as long as he could, unable to take control because there was too much and he was too dazed to even try. Wondering if he would finally begin the next great adventure, he suddenly heard a song he was very familiar with but would never get tired of hearing.

His spirits now soaring, he felt Fawkes' claws grip his shoulder as his strength began to fail completely, the unforgiving flames inching nearer as he was engulfed with fire of a different sort.

He welcomed its heat, allowing it to wrap around him before. . . .

He appeared in a bedroom in a column of flame that instantly collapsed back into Fawkes. His knees buckled beneath him and he was dimly aware of Fawkes now flying circles above him in concern.

"Albus!"

He wasn't sure, but it sounded like Minerva. He tried to turn his head toward her, but his muscles didn't seem to want to cooperate, so he just sat there.

Well, at least I had not fallen on my face, he thought, frankly amazed he had

managed to land upright at all, albeit on his rump. *I probably look like an absolute mess. Where am I?*

"Merlin, Albus, what happened?" she asked, her voice thick with worry.

He felt her hands on his back as he began to tip forward.

Catch me, my dear. I don't fancy tasting the floor.

Thankfully, she must have heard the first part of his silent plea as she prevented a fall that would have been rather embarrassing. Gripping him by the shoulders, she looked at his face.

"Ank-oo, ma-deer," he slurred horribly.

"Albus, you're bleeding!" she gasped, before quickly conjuring a cloth and pressing it to the oozing wound. "What happened?"

He winced, her sharp voice suddenly making his head pound harder as she guided him back, laying him down on her rug.

"Shot. Ent'fer 'Oldemtort."

Why did his words sound funny?

"I'm sending for Poppy," McGonagall stated, flicking her wand and producing a patronus which she quickly sent to Madam Pomfrey.

"I fink I 'abe uh con'ushin, M'erva. 'Arm uhs 'eeken'd. 'Ullet hit me."

Minerva's face inched closer to his, trying to make sense of his garbled words.

"Albus, I can hardly understand you. Were you hit with a curse?"

"No, uh bullt."

"A Bolt?"

"No, 'Ugel gun."

"A gun? You mean a bullet?" she asked, appalled. "You were shot by one of those muggle weapons?"

"Ya," he said, relieved she had finally gotten it as expanding black spots were now

peppering his vision.

Suddenly, Madam Pomfrey exited the fireplace, hurrying forward before Severus appeared from the green flames behind her.

Hmm, does Minerva know her center lamp is crooked? Dumbledore wondered, staring up at the bright ceiling fixtures before all coherent thought finally fell from his grasp.

O o O o O

A/N: Thanks for the many reviews, they have helped me more than I can say.

Next part, *A Matter of Thought*, is under construction.

A Matter of Thought

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Harry and the Prophecy?—Yes, Harry is still part of the prophecy. The first prophecy is still valid, and the second (concerning Voldemort's resurrection) has just been fulfilled (obviously).

Speed of Story—I understand a lot has been happening in the story in a very short amount of time (such as the last few chapters occurring within a span of a few days-plot wise), but in real life things can occur this quickly, so I don't think it's all that farfetched. However, I do apologize if I have given anyone 'reader-whiplash'. With that said, there is a calm coming (I believe the characters have earned it :P) so hopefully that will ease the pace of the plot and give everyone a moment to breathe before more chaos happens.

Voldemort and Harry's connection—It stems back to the failed curse. As Dumbledore explained in Part 18: Distraction, Voldemort's hatred for Harry touched him while it was still stemming from Voldemort (casting the AK), and, when the curse failed and returned back to Voldemort, that connection was never severed because the AK had been unable to kill Harry. It is also why Harry is particularly sensitive to whenever Voldemort is feeling any sort of hatred.

Endless Peril, Depressing Tale—Hmm, I suppose it does help being the author, knowing what is going to happen and all of that. I suppose things do seem rather dire, and it is just the beginning (of the end), but rest assured, I do not write dark stories, just shaded ones :P. Besides, what's the point of writing (and reading) a 'good vs evil' story that has no struggle? Have faith.

British Police having Guns—I only learned after I wrote the last part that British Police do not usually carry firearms. Sigh, I cannot believe that after doing research on Britain's version of SWAT I managed to miss that fact, so I apologize for the error, but will be leaving the part as it is.

Part 24: A Matter of Thought

Severus watched Pomfrey work, handing over whatever potion she requested.

"Thank you," she said, gently forcing another vial of potion down Dumbledore's throat.

Severus had to look away as he fought back a memory of the future he had left.

The memory of Dumbledore's death.

It had been less than a year before Harry had sent him to the past. Voldemort had come across another vile spell, one that turned the victim's own magic against them. In essence, it recreated the horrid phenomenon some witches and wizards, who fear their magic, occasionally exhibit. Chaotic magic. Only this was worse. Far worse. For it did not merely corrupt an individual's magic, but directed their twisted magic back upon themselves, forcing their own magic to poison and harm their minds. In the end, Albus Dumbledore had lost all sense of time, place, and self. His fate had been worse than his late sister, Arianna. Within a month, his mind was all but destroyed, and it was only through sheer strength of will and Severus' occlumencing assistance that he had lasted that long. Most lost themselves within a week.

'An old spell for an old man,' Voldemort had said.

Severus swallowed. He couldn't allow anything even remotely like that happen again.

"Poppy, are the potions working?" Pomona asked, entering the infirmary with Remus, Minerva, and Filius.

Madam Pomfrey looked up, her face grave. "I've only been able to minimize some of the damage I've detected, primarily internal bleeding. This is a serious head injury, and I fear fragments of his skull have perforated into his brain, as I've detected minute clusters of dead brain cells. Of course, I've healed the visible damage, but cannot go much beyond that, even with the potions."

"What do you mean?" Filius asked before glancing up at Fawkes who had perched himself at the foot of Albus' bed. "Couldn't Fawkes heal him?"

Pomfrey shook her head. "That would only make things worse. Sure, it would heal his skull and flesh, no problem, but in doing so it would summon the bone fragments currently resting in his brain through more brain tissue, damaging his mind further."

Filius frowned.

"It's why I opted to fuse the skull fracture rather than cast the generic healing spell. I cannot attempt anything that may move those fragments because there is nothing that can heal brain tissue. Not even phoenix tears."

Severus glanced at the recently healed area, seeing a faint 'dent' at the edge of

Dumbledore's brow where the fusion had occurred just beneath.

"Are you saying he has irreparable brain damage?" Minerva asked faintly, hand on her chest. "That he'll never recover from whatever damage has been done?"

Filius stepped closer to Albus' bed, his eyes growing sorrowful as Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. This could not be happening. Meanwhile, Remus looked down at the floor, deep in thought.

"Surely something can be done to reverse what's happened," Pomona said, not willing to give in to despair just yet.

"The human mind is a fragile thing, as you all know. Magic cannot fix everything," Pomfrey sighed, causing some of their thoughts to stray to the Longbottoms.

"Wait, before we begin assuming the worst, why don't we call in someone who knows more about head trauma?" Remus suggested.

Madam Pomfrey looked up, slightly irked. "I am considered an expert in this area. I have been called to St. Mungos many times to assist in treating–"

"Spells affecting the mind, but not actual physical brain trauma. Let's face it, with magic, we rarely experience this sort of thing. Our innate magic usually protects us against skull fractures and the like, but this injury was caused by a high powered projectile that frankly moves faster than many, if not all, objects in our world. We need to go to a Healer who has experience in his kind of injury, and we are not going to find them in our world," Remus countered frankly.

"Remus, you cannot be suggesting—" Minerva began.

"I agree with Remus," Severus put in. "We need to take the Headmaster to someone with knowledge in this area."

"But muggles? Their methods are downright barbaric!" she continued.

"They do not have magic, so must go about things differently," Severus stated.

"They have specialized equipment to diagnose and treat these sorts of things," Remus said. "I've had some firsthand experience with their . . . 'x-ray's. They were able to produce an image of my brain and leg bones after an automobile accident. It was remarkable. I have not seen anything remotely capable of that anywhere else."

"I have a friend who has some contacts in muggle hospitals. I will see them and see

if they know anyone who may be able to help," Filius chirped in.

They looked to McGonagall, waiting for her thoughts on the matter. She sighed, but nodded.

"Very well, but we are not going to allow them to do anything to him until we have thoroughly discussed it," she said.

"Of course," Filius said, before hurrying out.

O o O o O

Madam Bones could hardly believe what she was seeing.

There was a massive blob of glass in the middle of the Hall of Prophecy. The shelves on one side of the hall were all completely bare of prophecy orbs, while a number of shelves on the other side had been blasted apart and were missing a few orbs here and there. She walked around the glass mound and made her way to the area that seemed to be a point of origin.

She stepped beside the spot that seemed to be the root of the spell 'cone' that had caused the mass destruction of orbs. Looking up, her eyes scanned the large chamber, amazed by how much damage the two powerful wizards had done in less than a minute.

Shaking her head, her eyes glanced to the shelf on her left.

There was blood splatter and something. . . .

She turned to face it fully, pulling out her wand. Carefully, she extracted an odd metal object from the side panel of the shelf. It was a misshapen mass of metal no larger than the end of her pinky.

Well, she found the bullet.

"Madam," an auror called from the other side of the heap of glass.

"Yes?" she asked, placing the bullet in a small bag within her side pocket.

"I've found some blood," he said, pointing down near where he was standing.

That certainly caught her attention and she quickly made her way over. From their initial scans, they found that there were only two pairs of apparition and disapparation points entering and leaving the room, which meant that Dumbledore

was not the only one who had suffered an injury.

Looking down, sure enough, there were several drops of blood trailing to the 96th shelf.

Hmm, so Voldemort has been injured. . . .

O o O o O

Filius, true to his word, got in contact with his friend, Todd, who insisted they bring Albus to the 'neurologist' (brain doctor) as soon as possible.

"How are we going to get him there?" Pomona asked, glancing at Dumbledore who was still unconscious.

"I believe a portkey would be best, after we have ensured we won't accidently jar anything further," Pomfrey said.

Severus nodded. "A Petrificus Totalus should do just that."

"I agree," Filius said before holding up a plain yellow pencil. "Todd has already arranged a room for us to arrive in at the muggle hospital in London. This is the portkey. We need to leave within the next three hours. The doctor who will be seeing Albus is a Squib, so we need not worry about hiding magic from him, but I suggest we go in muggle clothing just the same."

"Very good," Minerva said, still not completely convinced this was the best course of action, but there wasn't much of an option. She glanced at Albus in worry, before freezing. "Albus?"

That immediately caused everyone to turn, finding Dumbledore staring at them.

Pomfrey hurried toward him, the others close behind.

"Albus, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"Sore. Wha' happened?" he asked, before frowning at his poor speech; though, at least it wasn't as bad as before. There was now only a very faint trace of slurred pronunciation, as if his tongue and lips were tired. Still, Filius and the others had to force themselves not to look at each other worriedly.

"Fawkes brought you to Minerva's quarters. Do you remember?" Pomfrey asked.

Albus shook his head, clearly confused. "Last thing I recall is Tom and fiendfyre."

"Can you tell us what happened before that? Madam Bones found evidence that you dueled him in the Department of Mysteries," Filius asked.

"Glass," Dumbledore stated, closing his eyes. They gave him a moment, as it was obviously taking him some effort to remember. He reopened his eyes and looked at McGonagall. "I always enjoy our time together, my dear. Did you know, your favorite tea cup has an uncanny 'semblance to the prophecy orbs in the Hall of Prophecy? Hmm, I wonder if the Unspeakables will be upset with how the hall looks now. Tom was quite displeased when I prevented him from hearing Trelawney." Dumbledore shook his head before blinking at them. "Forgive me. I'm finding it hard to concentrate. What was your question?"

Madam Pomfrey gave his hand a pat. "It's alright, Albus." She glanced back to the others before refocusing. Dumbledore seemed oblivious to her sudden hesitancy, although he always seemed to look someplace else whenever someone became uncomfortable for whatever reason. "Albus, because of what's happened, we feel it best we take you to a specialist."

"Oh?" Albus asked before continuing. "That's reasonable I suppose. In my youth, my mother was always on me and my brother for jumping on the bed. Said she didn't want our noggins to get bumped and jumbled."

Severus stepped forward. "Yes, which is why we believe it best for you to see a muggle doctor who specializes in head injuries, Headmaster."

"Very well. When do we go?" Albus asked, his right eye squinting slightly, as if in pain.

"Well, unless you have any aversion to it, we were thinking within the hour," Madam Pomfrey said, giving him a concerned look as he lifted his hand and placed it on his right eyebrow. "Albus?"

"Eye-ache," he stated, closing his eyes.

Remus looked at Filius and the others. "Shall we then? I believe the sooner we go the better."

Even McGonagall agreed.

O o O o O

"How is he, dear?" Perenelle asked, placing a gentle hand on the side of her husband's arm.

"Better, though I fear I was unable to block the connection as well as I had hoped," Nicholas said, turning away from Harry's room but remaining in the doorway. "He sensed pain."

Perenelle frowned. "Pain? Surely you don't mean . . . was Voldemort injured?"

They had been kept apprised of the situation in the Wizarding World, and knew of the recent attacks, as well as the break out at Azkaban and of the free wandering Dementors.

"I believe so. Any word about Albus?" Nicholas asked.

Perenelle shook her head. "Not much. Minerva simply said they were on their way to see a specialist. They are worried he may have suffered more than a mere concussion."

"Hmm, I feared as much when she told us about his injury involving a muggle gun. Wizards underestimate the power of armed and agitated muggles."

"Quite," Perenelle agreed.

O o O o O

"Dr. Price, this is Albus Dumbledore," Filius introduced.

Dr. Price smiled and stepped forward, relieved that at least some wizards knew how to dress somewhat appropriately in the muggle world, though they were still dressed . . . peculiarly.

The Headmaster, who was dressed in black slacks with a black and purple tie-dye t-shirt under a velvet vest, was seated. A man in dark clothing stood beside him and was by far the most appropriately dressed for the muggle world, although he appeared to be an adult goth. On the other side of the chair was a woman in old fashioned nurse attire and in front of her was a very short man who looked more like a child with a mustache than anything else. On the whole, they looked like a mismatched group from a circus . . . either that or escapees from a mental ward who had kidnapped a nurse.

"Good evening, sir," Price said, extending his right hand for Dumbledore to take.

He carefully observed the older man's movements, watching for anything that may show how severe the recent brain trauma was. So far, he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary as he clasped Dumbledore's hand in his own.

"How are you feeling, sir?" he asked.

"Honestly, not too bad, although I certainly feel off," Albus said, before his eyes strayed from Price's face and looked at the pictures on the wall behind him.

"Well, that's understandable," Price said before looking at the others in the room who quickly introduced themselves. With that done, Price refocused on his patient. "I'd like to carry out a few tests as the CT Scanner is being prepared. You all can either wait in the next room or sit quietly over there. These tests do not require privacy."

They did as they were told, moving to the left side of the room, although Madam Pomfrey remained the closest to watch.

Price guided Albus to the examination table and the Headmaster promptly sat himself on the edge.

"Alright, fists please," Dr. Price said after carrying out the simple things he did with every patient, such as blood pressure and pulse rate.

Dumbledore held out his hands and closed them into fists as requested.

"Try to keep them where they are as best you can," Price said, placing his hands on top of his and applying a gentle downward pressure before stopping and jotting a note down on his clipboard. He then repeated the process, pushing Dumbledore's fists upward, inward, and outward.

He nodded to himself, not really surprised by his findings. It matched with what he had been told about the man's injury.

He continued on to other strength, motor control, and hand-eye coordination tests, marking down things on his chart as the others watched in silence.

"Well, I will wait until after I review your CT Scan to share my findings with you. I like to have as much information as possible before I share anything with my patients," he said.

"I understand," Dumbledore said simply as a nurse knocked and entered, pushing a wheelchair in front of her.

"The CT scanner is ready, doctor," she said.

"Very good," Price said, taking the wheelchair from her and placing it near the exam table.

His patient's eyebrows rose.

"It's hospital policy when serious head trauma is involved," Price explained gently, unsure how the Head of the Wizengamot would respond to the somewhat demeaning position of being pushed in a wheelchair.

He needn't have worried.

Dumbledore's face broke into a wide grin and quickly sat himself in it, patting the armrests. "I've always wanted to do a wheelie in one of these!"

Dr. Price blinked, deciding this man either had suffered more brain damage than his tests had suggested or he really was as nuts as some people said. He was leaning toward the latter.

"You will do no such thing!" Pomfrey exclaimed. "You're here because you have brain damage, Albus! I will not allow you to risk receiving more!"

"Cushion charms, Poppy, cushion charms," he bantered, although it was clear he knew he had lost this fight.

She huffed, shaking her head. Severus stood by the wall, crossing his arms.

"Shall we then?" Dr. Price asked, wondering if it was safe to interrupt.

"Yes, Dr. Price," Filius said cheerfully, choosing to ignore the minor argument that had just transpired.

Price, pushing the wheelchair, led the way with Severus, Filius, and Pomfrey following closely behind.

Entering the room with the CT Scanner, Price felt those behind him stare at the contraption in front of them, while Dumbledore leaned forward, amazed.

"It's like a giant LifeSaver sweet! Marvelous!"

O o O o O

Ministry leaders and workers were each grateful when the day was considered done and they were permitted to return home to their families for dinner.

The Oblivators sighed and shook out their wand hands, trying to drive away the soreness in their wrists at having to cast so many *obliviates* in the past fifteen hours.

Aurors all sagged on their couches, thankful they had been able to return home and relax after the craziest day of the decade. They had dueled Death Eaters, capturing a few while driving back the rest — granted, there was little 'driving back' as the Death Eaters had usually just chosen to leave. They had made sure the muggleborn families were safe after relocating them and setting up stricter security around their new homes. They had also convinced muggle authorities in-the-know that the danger was over (for now), and that they were doing their best to ensure nothing like this happened again. The promise sounded hollow even to their ears. And finally, they began setting up maps that would hopefully help in tracking the movements of the renegade dementors.

Madam Bones closed her eyes, sinking into a chair as the sound of water filling her bathtub echoed toward her. She had just returned from the Ministry and had seen the charred remnants of the Minister's office. It was a wonder anyone left that room alive.

Bones sighed. Auror Doe had not. She had been killed by Voldemort upon his arrival, before he had used the Minister as a shield against Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore had managed to get a reaction from him, causing him to lash out, tossing the Minister aside as he unleashed a heavy dose of fiendfyre. Fudge had been beside himself when he recounted that experience.

She shook her head.

The Statute of Secrecy was still holding, but just barely. The Muggle Prime Minister was understandably livid. It was only thanks to her quick thinking of promptly providing him with all of the information they had that prevented him from doing something truly rash. And Fudge hadn't helped the situation at all. He really needed to go.

Madam Bones slowly stood up, wondering what changes the last 24 hours would bring. Everything would be out in the Daily Prophet in the morning. The Wizarding World would know Voldemort was truly back, and back with a vengeance. They would learn the risks he was willing to take, the fact he no longer cared much for the Statute of Secrecy (not that he ever really cared about it) and that he had ravaged many areas of the world, both wizard and muggle, in the span of only a few hours.

He and his numbers had emptied Azkaban, convinced the dementors to rebel (not that that was hard), destroyed seven muggleborn homes, broke through the Ministry Wards (she suspected at least one traitor in the Ministry ranks), broke into the Hall of Prophecy, and utterly ruined the Minister's office. Five muggleborn families, seven aurors and over twenty muggles (police and pedestrians) had been killed, while

fifteen aurors and nearly a hundred muggles had been injured.

Was the Ministry ready for a war against this monster? Was the world?

O o O o O

Dr. Price motioned them to sit. Dumbledore had fallen asleep and was blissfully resting in the room next door with a nurse who would wake him every two hours, as was protocol. Severus, Filius, and Poppy sat down, glancing anxiously at the folder on Price's lap.

"So?" Pomfrey asked, getting a little impatient. She was used to being the Healer, not the concerned and worried party.

Dr. Price straightened and turned the folder around to face them before opening it.

"Considering the initial damage of his injury, he is doing very well. Your Blood Vessel Repairing and Blood Replenishing potions helped prevent more serious conditions from cropping up, such as subarachnoid hemorrhaging and subdural hematomas," Dr. Price began.

"I am sensing a 'however'," Severus stated.

"Yes." Price flipped a page over, revealing a brain scan image. "As you can see, there are fragments of bone that pierced into the right side of his frontal lobe. These four—" He pointed to 4 tiny shards near the point of entry. "—Do not worry me much, but these two—" He moved the end of his pen and tapped the page. "—Are a different story. The piece behind and above his right eye has me the most concerned. Despite the assistance the potions have provided, this bone fragment has caused substantial pressure due to swelling to build behind his eye and down onto the optic nerve. If left untreated, it may cause irreparable vision problems in his right eye, not to mention damage brain tissue around the immediate area. As for the other, it is of concern because of how deeply it has penetrated into the frontal lobe. Now, after examining him, I do not believe the damage this piece caused is severe, but minor to moderate—which frankly astounds me. I don't know if it was because of the immediate treatment he received from you, his innate magic, or what, but the overall damage he has suffered would barely be classified as a moderate traumatic brain injury. He is a very fortunate man."

"Okay, but what does the damage he has mean, exactly?" Filius chirped.

"I will be frank with you all, as it's nearly impossible to provide a gentle explanation where this is concerned. As the bone fragment entered his brain and traveled, it

disturbed the tissue around and behind it, pulling tiny portions of brain matter along as it went. Now, in this instance, it is not as catastrophic as it sounds, as the bone fragments were thin and sharp instead of blunt and coarse, but I would be lying if I said this did not have serious consequences that must be addressed."

"Alright, what are we facing?" Pomfrey asked. "How can we help him; what can we expect?"

"The frontal lobe is primarily responsible for conscious thought, voluntary movement, and individual personality characteristics. Now, after my examination of him, I found the left side of his body is noticeably weaker than his right; granted, he's still the strongest and fastest man I have ever seen his age, as his reactions and fine motor skills rival most middle aged men, but the fact remains that his left side has noticeably suffered. Primarily, his movements on the left side are slower and less fluid than his right, enough that it has impacted his pronunciation."

"Can this be fixed?" Filius asked worriedly.

"It should be through physical therapy, speech therapy, and exercise. Though frail, the mind is a very resilient thing," Price assured. "But his physical condition is only part of it. Due to the nature of his injury, I need to caution you all of the psychological and mental effects this may have on him. In fact, I have already seen some signs of it, although it is not nearly as severe as other cases I have handled before. As you have no doubt noticed, his attention span has decreased a great deal and he is easily distracted. This problem may resolve itself in time, but there are also some mental exercises he can do to help him regain at least some of his previous focus; so, for now, just be patient with him."

Pomfrey and Filius nodded seriously, promising to do as the doctor said.

Dr. Price fought down a sigh and turned his eyes back to the folder before him.

"Before we go on to treatment options, I need to caution you of possible . . . outbursts Mr. Dumbledore may exhibit. Due to the damage to the inferior orbital surface of the frontal lobe here—" he pointed to the mentioned region that resided at the bottom of the frontal lobe near his right eye, "—he may experience sudden bouts of aggression and rage."

"How sudden? Would they not have a trigger?" Pomfrey asked.

"I honestly don't know. I've had patients who have these emotions randomly and seemingly with no reason, while others have triggers. For example, they are annoyed by something, and instead of reacting the way they normally would have,

they lash out. It goes hand-in-hand with the next possible consequence of this." He tapped the aforementioned damaged portion once more. "His ability to discern what is socially acceptable and what is not may have become impaired."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You mean the Headmaster may occasionally spew a curse word?"

"That is a possibility, but I mean his social graces, perceptions regarding risk-taking and rule-breaking in general may be skewed now." Price quickly lifted a hand to stop them from voicing their concerns. "Understand, I am merely laying out what may happen so you will all be prepared for any problems."

"I'll say they're problems! He's the Headmaster of a school with well over two hundred students, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW! If his judgment has been impaired by any degree . . . it would be disastrous!" Madam Pomfrey cried.

"Madam," Dr. Price said, his voice very serious. "Every case of brain injury is different, and it is impossible to predict how someone will be affected exactly. All we can do is look at previous cases and discern what they have in common to help us with similar and current cases. As it has been barely a day since Mr. Dumbledore gained these injuries, we need to consider what may come. The next 24 hours will be very telling to the kinds of long term consequences he will have. However, with that said, after personally examining him and seeing the extent of his injuries and his current state of mind, I do not believe his ability to continue his current roles is in serious jeopardy; but I think it would be irresponsible to simply assume everything will be or should remain as it was. Also, let me remind you, he is very fortunate and he is doing extremely well. I would go as far as labeling this as a miracle. Most people with an open head wound like Mr. Dumbledore's would have received more serious brain trauma from the bone fragments, not to mention life threatening bleeding and swelling of the brain that would cause further brain damage." Dr. Price shook his head, clearly amazed by Dumbledore's prognosis.

"Thank you, Doctor," Filius said.

"I'm just telling you the truth," Dr. Price said, before refocusing. "Now, treatment and recovery. . . ."

O o O o O

Dumbledore blinked, staring at the tiled ceiling above him. Where was he? Oh, yes! In the muggle hospital. Severus and the others had taken him there to try and help him with his apparent brain injury.

Well, as he had told Dr. Price, he didn't feel all that bad, but he did feel off, though, after that night's rest, he felt much improved. Hmm, perhaps it would be alright for him to return to Hogwarts now? Fudge was bound to need some reining in soon, especially as he had just lost his office to fiendfyre. The pathetic man was no doubt blubbering about it right this moment, if his memory concerning Cornelius was right, which it unfortunately was.

He glanced at his IV and the other bizarre wires taped to him.

Ah, muggle technology, so wondrous!

"Mr. Dumbledore, good morning," a nurse said, walking over to his bed and checking the machines beside him.

"Hello—" he squinted at her nametag. "—Nurse Dorothy."

She was an older nurse, her hair nearly completely white and her face full of kind wrinkles. She was the same nurse who had stayed with him the night before, waking him up periodically and asking him super easy questions. Unfortunately, he had been too sleepy at the time to ask why she was interrupting his sleep.

"Madam, why were you waking me up last night and asking me the same questions over and over again?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, it's procedure to do so after any sort of head injury. It helps us diagnose the severity of the damage."

"Oh, alright. Did I answer them all alright?" he asked, curious now.

"Considering your recent trauma, you answered them remarkably well," she said with a smile before heading out after briefly stating his vitals looked *quite* good.

He blinked.

Had she just . . . flirted with him?

He shook himself.

Soon after she left, Dr. Price, Severus, Minerva, and Madam Pomfrey came in.

Hmm, they look really serious.

"Good morning, Headmaster," Severus stated.

"How are you feeling, Albus?" Minerva asked as Poppy came up and seemed to scan for anything wrong.

Dumbledore looked at Poppy. "Hmm, well, I thought I was feeling splendid, but, with how you are looking at me, I'm not so sure now."

"Oh! We're just concerned about you, is all, Albus," Pomfrey said hurriedly.

Suddenly wishing he had his half moon spectacles to look over, he pierced them with a serious stare. "Is there something you all wish to tell me?"

Severus and the others all looked to Dr. Price, who took their stares quite well. Apparently, he had much practice in this sort of thing.

Motioning for them all to get comfortable, Dr. Price took a seat beside Dumbledore's bed. "I've brought your case to the neurological team of the hospital and discussed what the best course of action to take would be. Several shards of bone entered your frontal lobe, but the bone fragment that has us the most concerned, and is why we are proposing this, is the one just above your right optic nerve. We strongly believe this will become a problem and prevent you from using your right eye properly. Added to that, there is a risk that a sharp edge of the bone fragment may later cut the surrounding tissues and cause bleeding that would go unnoticed until grave symptoms cropped up. Also, although the other shards do not concern us as much, removing them would be in your best interests to prevent complications in the future."

"So you're telling me I'm going to need to have surgery," Dumbledore said.

"Yes, sir."

"I admit, my right eye does seem to be having some trouble. There is an odd ache just behind it and it feels rather stiff. I don't know how else to describe it."

"That is likely due to the pressure the fragment is creating on the nerve," Price calmly explained.

"Then I agree to the surgery. Is there anything specific about it I should know?"

"I will not go into the particulars unless you wish me to, but, I will not lie to you, this procedure will be dangerous."

"I have my affairs in order. Gringotts has my Will and other documents, should the worst happen," Albus said simply.

"Very well. There are some other things I need to talk to you about concerning your condition before we proceed further, though," Price said, before covering everything he had told the others the night before.

"Hmm, explains why I'm finding it difficult to concentrate on one thing for an extended period," Dumbledore mused.

"This problem may alleviate in time, so don't dwell on it too much," Price advised.

"My difficulty in focusing is not my main concern right now, doctor. What is is the sudden bouts of anger or emotional frailty you mentioned I could experience, and I certainly do not want to begin questioning my ability to recognize consequences or be unable to make plans," Dumbledore said with a frown. "I would need to resign from all of my posts in the wizarding world."

"Well, the fact that you are concerned about it is a good sign in my book, not to mention how you just displayed you are foreseeing the choices that may need to be made if you were unable to carry out your responsibilities."

"Dr. Price is right, Albus. Besides, if problems like that do arise — and that is *if* — I would step in and help you, even if I had to force you," Minerva said with a smile.

"That is a comfort, Minerva, but what if this occurred while I was in a state of rage? I don't believe you have ever seen me truly angry, my dear."

Severus stepped up, his sudden strength of presence causing Albus' eyes to shoot to his.

"I would back her up, as would the rest of the staff," Severus stated. "Have no doubt, if need be, we would take care of things."

Pomfrey and McGonagall turned and nearly gaped at Severus, utterly amazed by his tone. They had never heard him speak with such force before, and to the Headmaster, no less. Dr. Price looked at him in obvious approval as Dumbledore continued to stare at him.

Albus had the strangest feeling Severus' statement was more than mere words of comfort; they were words of absolute certainty. Fact. Experience? The Potion Master's eyes gazing back at him were sharper than anything he could ever remember seeing. They held a strength he had never seen in the young man before, holding a power he hadn't ever known the younger man even possessed.

It was an energy that rivaled any anger, any vengeance, and any hate. It was of

compassion, confident care, and, dare he label it? Agápe. Love.

He wasn't sure if it was the 'emotional frailty' Dr. Price had mentioned, or his own natural tendency to react to such deep signs of warmth, but, to his shame, his eyes welled with tears and he was forced to pinch the bridge of his nose to hold back the rest.

"Thank you, Severus," he said, barely managing to keep his voice steady with the sudden lump in his throat.

O o O o O

"Well, Harry, why don't we go check on Norberta?" Nicholas asked. "There is something I want to discuss."

Harry smiled and nodded. The pain in his scar had finally fallen to a barely noticeable ache earlier that morning, but his mind still felt a bit muddled. It was the same sort of haziness one gets when they finally begin getting over a rough cold, when things don't seem to register in perfect clarity yet. He supposed it was because of whatever Nicholas had done, but as it had dulled the horrible connection to Voldemort, he wasn't about to complain.

The night before last had been rough, even with Nicholas' help.

He had seen things, heard things, and felt things.

They had only been flashes and short blips of conversations, but the feelings . . . those had been the most vivid.

He told Nicholas and Perenelle everything he could remember, though much of it had been hard to describe.

Someone named 'Bellatrix' had been there, speaking in a soft but frightened tone. There was blood. Everywhere it seemed. There had been flashes of spells. Harry believed they were of the healing sort, but they didn't seem to be working the way Voldemort wished, and apparently needed—if Harry had discerned his emotions correctly. Furious rage, pain and outrage, all with an underlying trickle of fear. . . .

There was a bloody hole in his side. Harry had seen a glimpse of it when Voldemort had looked down in casting some sort of pain relieving charm. The dark wizard had been shot, and Harry was certain it had not been a simple, in-and-out wound. If the pain that had trickled over the bond was any indication, the bullet had made quite a mess in his chest.

Harry shuddered, recalling a few of the pages in those medical books he had borrowed from the library detailing similar injuries and necessary treatments.

Come to think of it. . . .

His eyes widened.

Where had his library book gone?

He stopped, making Nicholas turn back and look at him questioningly.

"Something wrong, child?" he asked.

"My library book! I had dropped it when. . . . What will the library do when I don't return the book?" he asked, stunned he hadn't thought about it until just that moment.

Nicholas tilted his head, as if remembering something.

"If I remember correctly, Dumbledore has taken care of that. He asked Mrs. Figg to send a message to the library and inform them the book was lost due to circumstances beyond your control and to send the cost of the book to him so he could purchase a new one for them."

Harry blinked. Nicholas must have a fine memory to be able to confidently rattle all that information so quickly.

"Oh. I'll need to thank Professor Dumbledore the next time I see him then," Harry said.

Nicholas nodded, though he seemed to be pained by something.

"Sir?" Harry asked, noticing the way Nicholas' face had saddened.

He didn't say anything, just motioned him to follow. When they came under a tree near the stables, Nicholas finally turned and faced him as he sat down on the grass. Harry sat cross-legged in the grass as well, allowing Coral to slither from his wrist and investigate the brush nearby.

"As you know, Harry, some things happened the other night. I won't go deeply into it, because things are still being investigated, but many people got hurt. Both wizards and muggles," Nicholas said.

"People died as well," Harry said softly. "I didn't quite see it, but . . . I could feel it,

sense his . . . glee."

Nicholas gave a sad sigh. "I had hoped I had been able to shield you more, but I see this bond is stronger than I had initially anticipated. Hate really is the poison of humanity."

Harry bowed his head, trying not to think about the other things he had felt, particularly the 'positive' emotions he had felt from the monster.

"How many?" Harry asked, lifting his eyes.

"I don't know the numbers, Harry, and even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You should not have to hear such things."

"Did you know any who were?"

Nicholas wasn't sure if the questioned concerned people who had been murdered or injured.

"Personally, I didn't know any who were killed," he said, deciding that was a safe answer.

"And hurt?" Harry asked.

Hm, the boy was certainly a perceptive one. Well, he was going to tell him anyway.

"Albus Dumbledore has been taken to a specialist for a head wound and is currently being treated. They expect him to recover well enough to return to Hogwarts and his other responsibilities by the time term begins."

:'Well enough'?: Coral hissed by his knee. :I do not like the sound of that, Harry:

:Neither do I, but it's not like we can help . . . unless. . . .: Harry answered before looking back to Nicholas. "Is there something I can do? Does he need healing?"

If Nicholas was surprised by the question, he didn't show it.

"At this time, no, or at least not the healing you can provide."

"What happened to him?" Harry couldn't help but ask.

"Harry, it's not my place to say, but know that he is in capable hands and they will heal him to the best of their ability."

Harry nodded, grudgingly understanding he couldn't fix, or even try to fix, everything.

"Now, I haven't taken you to the stables to inform you of Albus, but to discuss something else entirely. I have been giving this a lot of thought, and, after sharing my thoughts with my wife, she agrees with my decision. However, it is not quite my decision to make, but yours."

Harry didn't say anything, waiting for Nicholas to continue.

"It concerns your magic, specifically your lock."

Harry perked up, very interested now. Coral had risen her head as well.

"I believe I can help you begin unlocking it, and, if you wish, we can begin today."

O o O o O

A/N: Much of the medical and brain information I included in this part came from www. brainandspinalcord .org. It is a very informative and helpful website. As odd as it sounds, I enjoyed researching the brain and the effects of certain injuries in my quest to make Dumbledore's injuries as realistic as possible. However, let me state I am not a doctor and do not claim to be extremely knowledgeable in such things- meaning, this is just a story, don't nitpick :P

Next part, *Cause and Effect*, is under construction.

Cause and Effect

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Magical Treatment for Dumbledore—Things like the Switching or Banishing Spell for the bone fragments could not be used because it requires the caster to see the object(s). As for Harry, he might have been able to help, but that is a lot to put on a little boy's shoulders, no matter how able, and the adults did not wish to burden him unnecessarily. Also, just as magic cannot magically cure the Longbottoms, it cannot outright cure Dumbledore, otherwise the Longbottoms would have been cured a long time ago.

Harry able to cure Draco's grievous head injury—Harry had applied his Parselmagic moments after the damage had occurred. The cells and tissue had not had time to actually die or scar.

Part 25: Cause and Effect

Voldemort gritted his teeth as Bella dabbed at his wound once more.

That muggle-lover had ruined everything.

Dumbledore really needed to die.

It was because of him that that muggle had been able to shoot him.

It was because of him that he had failed to hear the prophecy.

However . . . the old man had not thwarted everything. . . .

Voldemort smiled despite the pain and shortness of breath, recalling how the Minister had trembled in fear against him as he hissed into the man's ear.

He would allow things to calm as he maneuvered his pieces. Despite Dumbledore and this injury, things would go his way in the end.

O o O o O

Lucius paced in his office, waiting for Severus to arrive. He had sent for him an hour ago and only hoped he was not too busy with the old muggle-lover to come with what he had requested.

His life depended on it.

Finally, the fireplace burst green and Severus stepped from it.

"Severus, I assume you were—" he began.

"Yes, I have everything you requested."

Lucius was unable to hold back his sigh of relief.

"Good. Please, follow me. Bellatrix sent a portkey for us," he said, leading them into a room before firmly closing the door and casting a quick privacy ward, just in case.

"Does anyone suspect?" Severus asked as Lucius moved toward the desk with a black quill on it.

"No, and I have done as you have asked."

"Good, it is a relief to know Draco will be safe no matter what happens," Severus said.

Lucius nodded, once again grateful Severus understood the importance of family despite not having one of his own. His hand came over the portkey as Severus stepped beside him.

"This will take us to where he is staying," he stated, not needing to state who 'he' was.

"I understand," Severus said.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Severus," Lucius whispered as he placed his other hand on Severus' arm and activated the portkey. . . .

They appeared in a large dining room, not all that different from the Malfoy's. Severus quickly identified it as the home of Yaxley.

"Good of you to finally arrive, Severus. This way," Rodolphus Lestrange, Bellatrix's husband, said.

Severus went forward, leaving the room with Rodolphus. Lucius did not follow.

"What is his condition?" Severus asked, correctly assuming why he was there.

"I don't know, he has only allowed my wife in the room," Rodolphus stated blandly.

"He actually doesn't know she has sent for you." He smiled maliciously as they came to a closed door.

"I see," Severus said, totally unbothered by Rodolphus' words as he took hold of the handle before him.

Rodolphus blinked at Severus' boldness. "Well, unless you require something, I will leave you now."

"Very good," Severus returned with a nod as he confidently opened the door, and entered.

O o O

Severus closed the door behind him as his eyes quickly took in the room.

There was a wall blocking most of the bed from view of the door. He heard some rustlings, as if someone was scrambling for things. There was light, though it was on the other side the wall and obscured by what Severus correctly assumed to be furniture.

"Who has entered, Bellatrix? I have not given anyone permission to enter. Who dares?"

Severus forced himself to not startle at the voice as he slowed his approach.

"M-my Lord, I sent for him. For Severus. Your wound, my Lord, I-I am inept. I have done all that I can, but hoped my seeking Severus would please you, as he is more able than I," Bella said. "Please forgive me, my lord, bu—"

"Oh, my faithful servant. Come, come, Severus," Voldemort interrupted, his voice raspy.

Severus went around the wall, finding the Dark Lord lying in a bed with bloody bandages strewn throughout, and a batty Bella holding a pair of scissors and wad of gauze beside him. There was a disgusting stench in the air that Severus quickly identified. The sickly sweet, rusty smell could only be one thing—blood. There were empty potion vials all over the floor, blood all over the blankets and even on the walls. Bella's hair was, as usual, out of control, but what made it even worse were the streaks of dark red in it.

It was a rather horrid scene, to be honest, and Nagini coiled around the right back bedpost near Voldemort's head did not help matters.

"My Lord," Severus greeted with a respectful bow, as if nothing he was seeing was alarming. "Please, let me be of assistance."

"Bellatrix," Voldemort stated.

"Yes, My Lord?" she chirped.

"Move away."

Bella looked affronted, but knew not to contradict. She got up and moved to the corner to watch.

Severus stepped forward as Voldemort sat up with a barely hidden wince. He wished Bellatrix had been told to leave.

"What potions have you taken, My Lord?" Severus asked, stepping beside the bed and keeping his face neutral.

Anything the Dark Lord perceived as pity or any emotion of 'weakness' would not be received well.

"Blood Replenishing mostly, but I have taken a Blood Vessel Repairing and a Skelegrow," he stated, before adding, "Bellatrix insisted I take a Pain Reliever as well."

If he was embarrassed about the situation, he hid it very well.

"Last dose taken?" Severus asked, pulling out a rolled up leather pouch from his robes.

"Within the past hour, I have taken two Blood Replenishing, nothing else."

"Is the wound still open?" Severus asked, setting the pouch on the side table and unrolling it to reveal many potion vials and tools.

"Yes."

"Please show me where," Severus stated curtly, pulling out his wand.

Voldemort turned, motioning to his right side.

Severus could tell the movement was uncomfortable, but Voldemort wasn't the Dark Lord for nothing. He would not allow himself to show weakness.

Looking at the exposed, bloody mess, Severus found the Dark Lord's side covered in gauze magically kept in place by sticking charms. Bella had certainly been hard at work, though her work was sloppy and it was clear she was more skilled in dismembering than in healing.

Silently, he cast a diagnosing charm and a few other things to tell him how the Dark Lord was faring. All the while, Bellatrix and Nagini were avidly watching. Despite the fact he was here because of Bella, he knew if she saw anything at all suspicious he would be getting a pointblank Crucio, if not an AK, before he would be able to block or counter. And then there was Nagini. Even though Severus desired nothing more than to poison or pointblank curse the Dark Lord, Nagini would likely act before he could completely carry it out.

Oh yes, without a doubt, Nagini was Voldemort's greatest ally. Sometimes Severus wondered if Nagini considered Voldemort as a surrogate son or something. She was that protective of him.

However, even without Nagini and Bella, attempting any such a plan was doomed to fail anyway. Voldemort was immune to many poisons, thanks to the countless alterations he had made on himself, and he was very good at smelling out foul potions before he ingested them. Dumbledore didn't say Riddle was a brilliant student for nothing. And as for cursing him in his weakened state, Voldemort was still extremely fast, and he was *always* armed with his wand.

No, Severus would need to continue acting as a faithful servant. There was too much to lose if he failed — the light would lose a spy and Harry would lose a guide — and even if he succeeded in cursing Voldemort, there was the prophecy to consider. In the future, there had been a few occurrences where the Dark Lord should have outright been killed, but hadn't been. Severus suspected Old Magic was involved. Something was protecting Voldemort, preventing his demise, and Severus only hoped he was correct in believing Harry was the key to finally bringing it to an end.

As his medical spells finished sending him feedback, Severus frowned, although inside he rejoiced.

"Severus?" Voldemort asked, his voice frighteningly flat.

"What caused this?" Severus asked, despite knowing already.

Voldemort bit back a growl. "A metal projectile called a bullet."

"My Lord, I can see two of your ribs have recently been healed, but. . . ." Severus

took a deep breath, having to crush his elation behind his mental shields as he tried to sound grave. "The bullet entered and struck your second lowest rib, causing it to splinter as the bullet continued up, passing through your liver and clipping your right kidney before being lodged near the base of another rib. If the bullet had missed that rib, the bullet would have exited near the middle of your back, an inch from your spine. Unfortunately, it did not, and, because of Bellatrix's treatment, it is now imbedded in the repaired rib. I will not be able to remove it now, unless you wish me to physically go in. Simply summoning it may cause irreparable damage to your spine, not to mention severe damage to that newly healed rib."

"Then just leave it," Voldemort stated, though his eyes strayed to Bella.

The Dark Lord was not pleased.

"Of course, my Lord," Severus stated, deciding not to mention the risk of infection, least of all tetanus.

It was something most wizards never even considered, and the very few who did were muggleborn. Potions, such as Pepper-Up, usually handled such problems, but serious infections, such as ones that came about because of foreign bodies lodged in muscle, bone, and general tissue, could only be handled with aggressive potion regimens — potion regimens Severus was going to conveniently fail to comment on, far less provide.

"I will be giving you potions to heal the damage done to your liver and kidney. That should greatly aid in your recovery, my Lord," Severus said, retrieving the mentioned potions. "However, before you take them, you need to know you will be unable to channel any powerful spells for 48 hours. The potions will be channeling a portion of your magic to heal the internal damage and hindering it may postpone your recovery."

"Very well, Severus. How long before this wound is gone?"

"Well," Severus began, deciding some ego stroking was in order. "For an average wizard, I would say two to three weeks, but for you, with your power and magic reserves, I would say six to ten days."

Voldemort slowly nodded, contemplating his situation.

"That is not disagreeable. My plans do not call for much action from myself in the coming weeks anyway," Voldemort stated as Severus placed the necessary potions on the side table before putting his other things away.

"Shall I close the wound for you, My Lord?"

"Yes, as it is clear Bellatrix is incapable," Voldemort sneered, his annoyance with his most zealous servant coming through loud and clear.

Bellatrix cowered.

"Thank you for allowing me this honor, My Lord," Severus said as he expertly waved his wand, removing the soaked bandages and healing the bullet hole . . . happily sealing the debris and foreign contaminants within Voldemort's body.

O o O o O

Harry watched as Perenelle led Norberta out of the stables and into the field beside them.

Nicholas had told him they would need to use Dragon Magic to begin lowering the block on his magic, and as Norberta knew and trusted him, she was the optimum choice.

"You must do exactly as I say, Harry. If you fail to follow my instructions, it may lead to dreadful consequences," Nicholas said, placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

:Yes, Harry. Do what he says: Coral said at his feet, before slithering over to Perenelle to watch.

"I understand," Harry said, trying not to gulp too loudly.

"Alright. I want you to stare into her eyes and simply hold her gaze. Do not look away until she does," Nicholas said, moving around to stand beside Norberta and placed his hand on Norberta's scales.

Harry did as he was told, Norberta staring back into his eyes with an intensity he had never before seen in another's eyes as Nicholas began whispering a strange language.

Norberta's eyes sharpened as they gave a bluish glow before the glow shifted into one of silver. Harry couldn't have looked away even if he had wanted.

A rush of power surged, though Harry could not perceive from where. It was hot, but of a heat that was protective and persistent. He felt his hands close into fists and his knees grow weak, his eye contact with Norberta unwavering. Her eyes flashed again and he felt a weight at his center. It did not lift, but grew heavier, and he felt his chest

heaving and his heart pounding. Just when he thought he would be crushed from within, the weight sunk, as if absorbed, and that was when Norberta finally looked away. Harry tried to follow suit, but instead of simply looking away, his vision grew dark and he felt himself fall.

The next thing Harry knew was that he was lying in his bed in the Flamel's home.

"Well, Harry, I do believe you've made great progress today. Congratulations, you've just lifted about a quarter of the lock you had had," Mr. Flamel said, leaning over him.

Harry blinked. "What does that mean, sir?"

"Why don't you cast something and see?" he asked as Coral slithered off Nicholas' wrist and plopped onto the bed beside him.

Slowly, Harry sat up and pulled out his phoenix wand.

It felt different. It was definitely still his wand, but he could feel tendrils of warmth seeping to and from his palm and the wand's handle. It was amazing.

"What should I cast?" Harry asked.

Mr. Flamel paused, before taking out his reading glasses and promptly snapping it in two.

"How about Reparo?" he asked, placing his broken frames on the bed.

Harry blinked, before doing as suggested. He gathered his magic, a little nervous as this was the first time he had ever cast this spell—though he knew the incantation and wand movement. "*Reparo*."

His magic pulsed through the air, brushing through everything as he pointed his wand at the broken spectacles. There were odd popping, scrapping, and shuffling sounds echoing all around them as Nicholas' glasses magically unbent and were fixed. With that, Harry turned his eyes to the other things in the room, amazed to find them in even better shape than they were before.

Nicholas started laughing. "Well done, child! You see? And there is still three quarters of the lock left to lift, but before that you need to get used to the amount of magic now at your disposal."

Harry wholeheartedly agreed.

O o O o O

Remus entered his quarters within Hogwarts. Thanks to Dumbledore and the others, he would be able to remain as Hogwarts' DADA teacher for the foreseeable future. The curse was gone, well, both curses if you included his former Lycanthropy. Their work on the wards had produced a lot of benefits. Not only was the DADA curse gone, Hogwarts was more fortified than ever before. She had wards that would make Gringotts jealous and aggressive defenses that would activate immediately if anyone with ill-intent tried to break through, human or otherwise, particularly those under any kind of disguise.

He went to his couch, reclining back as he thought about recent events.

Albus would be returning to Hogwarts the following day, but would be confined to his bed for the next week. The surgery three days prior had been a success and the doctors were hopeful his recovery would be an uneventful one.

So far, the Headmaster's mental health was stable. He did admit to feeling a little fatigued, but that was to be expected. His speech patterns had improved, but he was going to a speech therapist just the same, as his pronunciation would falter when he was particularly tired. He was also seeing a physical therapist to help regain the bit of fine motor function he had lost on his left side. When he returned to Hogwarts, the therapists would work with him on Mondays and Thursdays. As for his attention span and ability to concentrate, it was still too soon to tell for sure, but it was looking much better than they had anticipated.

However, not everything was as positive.

After he had regained consciousness and received his first hospital meal, it soon became clear he had lost something. His sense of taste. At first, Pomfrey and the others had believed he just wanted them to bring him something sweet as he complained about the hospital food being bland, but after Severus took it upon himself to sneak in a lemon doughnut and transfigure the shape into a simple slice of bread, it became clear. After a few food experiments, they learned Dumbledore had hypogeusia—partial taste loss and hyposmia—partial smell loss. He could taste salt and sugar, but it had to be concentrated and not part of a complex sample of food. Such conditions were fairly common with frontal lobe trauma and Dr. Price said there was unfortunately nothing they could really do to help. It was up to Dumbledore's own body to repair the damage. Albus was disheartened, but took solace in the fact it may not be permanent. They remained hopeful this sensory loss would return eventually.

Remus closed his eyes, turning his thoughts elsewhere. He had just returned from

visiting Sirius and sharing some news with him. He kept Severus out of the conversation, as Sirius was still immature where it came to anything related to the man. When he had briefly mentioned Severus to him a few days before, he had gone off, making outlandish remarks on how Snape was probably bowing at the Dark Lord's feet.

Remus had set the record straight, stating Severus was a spy and that Dumbledore himself trusted him implicitly. Remus had also made it clear he would not hear another negative word from Sirius about the man. Remus still neglected to state Severus was Hogwarts' Potions Master and had become Harry's favorite teacher and treasured mentor, but Remus decided that could wait. Sirius was still recovering and didn't need to suffer a stroke.

Sirius had questioned where Harry was, of course, but considering recent events, grudgingly accepted Remus' words of, 'Albus has promised Harry is in a safe place but hasn't told us where.'

Remus sighed. He wished he knew where Harry was, but Albus and Minerva were being tightlipped about it. All he knew was that he wasn't with the Dursleys anymore and would never return to them, thankfully. Remus almost wished he was still a werewolf. If Severus' venomous words about them were any indication . . . maybe just once it would have been alright to. . . .

He perished the thought. What a horrible thing to even imagine. He chastised himself, focusing on something else.

The Ministry and Press were slowly settling down, panic wise, but now things were being set in motion. New safety measures and laws were being proposed while Fudge assured the public they were working on ensuring their well-being and that Dumbledore was on his way to a full recovery.

Madam Bones, Remus knew, was annoyed by Fudge's lax and carefree attitude, as were many other people, particularly members of the Wizengamot. Fudge was taking a relaxed-in-the-face-of-danger-to-improve-public-opinion-of-himself stance and Remus was fairly certain it would not end well — for anyone.

O o O o O

"I'm serious, Albus. Light work!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. "If I return and find you neck deep in paperwork and unconscious, I might just feel inclined to leave you like that!"

"Poppy, I assure you, I will not be doing any paperwork today. Minerva has already

taken it upon herself to remove every sheet of paper that may need my signature from this office. I will simply be having a little meeting with Cornelius and Amelia Bones so they can honestly tell the public they've seen me and that I'm not about to expire."

Pomfrey grumbled at that, wishing Dumbledore would take things a bit more seriously and remain in bed for another week instead of return to his duties. But he was Headmaster and Head of the Wizengamot and tons of other things. Work needed to be done. She still questioned whether or not it was a good idea to have Albus keep all of his positions, but at the moment finding a replacement would do more harm than good. Merlin only knew what sort of person would take his place if he did decide to step down from a post. With Fudge, she wouldn't be surprised if someone like Yaxley got involved.

"Well, if you begin to tire, you best return to bed, Albus," Pomfrey stated.

"I will, Poppy, I will," he promised, going behind his desk as the fireplace flared green.

Madam Bones stepped out, soon followed by Minister Fudge.

"Good morning, Madam Pomfrey," Madam Bones greeted before looking to Albus. "How are you, Albus?"

"Much better than I was last week," Dumbledore answered jovially.

"Yes, we were told you were under the care of experts outside the Ministry," Fudge said. "They treated you well?"

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, as if wondering why Cornelius would think otherwise, but in actuality he was surprised they didn't know he had been under the tender care of muggles.

"Yes, perfectly well. I owe them a great deal," he answered honestly.

"Well, Albus, I'll see you later," Pomfrey said, heading toward the door as he bid Fudge and Bones farewell with a nod.

"Of course, Poppy," Dumbledore answered before motioning Fudge and Madam Bones to the chairs across his desk.

O o O o O

Severus exited Lucius' study and went to the library. They had just finished discussing recent events and their precautions for what may come.

Entering the darkened library, he cast a soft lumos and began scanning the shelves. There was a lot of useful knowledge here and Severus wanted to reacquaint himself with a few counter spells.

He closed his eyes, the dark bindings reminding him of Riddle's diary he had recently destroyed. It had been quite resilient and resistant, but in the end it could not withstand his fiendfyre. He had disposed of the evil thing in the Room of Requirement, and it had been a refreshing venture.

He knew Lucius wasn't happy that he had destroyed the diary, but even Lucius had to admit the world was better off without it. He just hoped the Dark Lord wouldn't be asking for it anytime soon.

"Godfather?"

Severus turned, not surprised to find Draco standing behind him.

"Yes, Draco?" he asked, turning as he removed a book from the shelf.

Severus took in Draco's appearance. There was no denying the boy was a pureblood prince, but there was something . . . a tightness in his shoulders, a wariness etched in his young face that shouldn't be there.

"I didn't know you were here," Draco said after a moment. "Mother didn't say you would be coming or that you had arrived."

"That is because she does not know. I came here to speak with your father and to do some research," he said, deciding there was nothing that needed to be hidden at the moment.

Draco nodded, his eyes flickering to the book's cover.

He didn't comment on Severus' reading material — 'Magicks of Darkness' — instead, he shuffled his feet and looked nervous.

"Is there something bothering you, Draco?"

Draco slowly nodded before Severus motioned him to sit in a nearby chair as he went around and stood in front of him.

"About a week ago, I, uh, overheard my parents talking," Draco began.

Severus listened as Draco summarized everything he had heard, including the precautions that had been set up, how his parents were no longer supporting the Dark Lord, and about Harry being the one who must kill Voldemort.

"I see. Why have you not told your parents that you overheard?" Severus asked.

"They have enough to worry about, and my telling them wouldn't change anything," Draco reasoned. "Besides, father hates when people eavesdrop."

"Why are you telling me, then?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just . . . uncertain about a few things. If mother and I do leave Europe, what about father and everyone else? What about you? Do you think things will really get that bad? Do you think You-Know-Who will become that powerful?"

Severus bit back a sigh.

"Draco, I have always been honest with you, so listen to me now. Things may not get that bad, but if they do, I and a number of others have a few back up plans in place to help protect as many people as we can. Also know that your father and I will not throw our lives away in a futile endeavor, nor will we take needless risks. The same goes for any other who chooses to remain and fight if the future becomes exceedingly dire. And as for what I think about the Dark Lord . . . it is no longer a question of if he becomes that powerful. He is already. However, power is not everything. There are some things the Dark Lord will never understand or have. He is not unbeatable."

Draco nodded, though it was clear he wasn't exactly comforted by Snape's words, just slightly eased.

"Is Harry . . . I mean, is it true? Will Harry have to face him?"

"I believe Harry has already personally faced him twice in the past year, but if I understand your question, yes, someday he will have to face him once again and permanently defeat him."

"Is it because of what happened before? When he was a baby, I mean?" Draco asked.

"Yes." Severus chose not to elaborate. The answer alone was troubling enough.

"Do you think he will succeed, Godfather?" Draco asked.

Severus didn't answer immediately, his mind going to Harry's future battles and struggles, the failures and close calls until, in his mind's eye, he saw a pair of intense green eyes — the last thing he had seen before appearing in his quarters, nine years into the past.

"He will," Severus stated firmly, never so sure of anything in his life.

O o O o O

Dumbledore was happy to see Fudge leave his office, and though he didn't mind Madam Bones, he wanted to be alone so kindly bid her farewell as she vanished into the floo.

What a boring and nearly completely pointless meeting. Well, he supposed he just hadn't been in the mood to endure Fudge's painfully self-important droning voice— not that he ever was in the mood to, but that was beside the point.

Madam Bones was doing a good job as far as he could tell. He was relieved someone like her had become the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He doubted there were many other people who would have responded as well as she had during the past few weeks.

As for Fudge, the man was hopeless. If it was possible, he had become more idiotic than ever before. It was as if he was in another world, oblivious to the current dangers threatening the Ministry and the general population of England — muggle and wizard alike. It was almost as if. . . .

Albus frowned as something seemed to mentally hit him.

Something was remiss. Something was off. Something was wrong with Fudge.

Dumbledore opened his side drawer, reaching for the bowl he had sorely missed the past week. He set the bowl of lemon drops on his desk and put one in his mouth. Disappointed by the near lack of flavor, he stuffed in five more, not caring about the odd look Fawkes was now giving him.

Was he wrong? Was he seeing problems that weren't there (not that Fudge himself couldn't already be deemed a problem)?

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and began to occlude. Perhaps clearing his mind would help him get to the bottom of this.

As he did, random thoughts surfaced, thoughts and memories he was content to ponder on for a moment before pushing them aside and going on to the next.

Albus smiled, recalling what Severus had told him a few days ago about what he had done to Voldemort.

Only Severus would have the guts to seal foreign contaminants within a Dark Lord's body while being watched, not only by the monster himself, but by Bellatrix and Nagini. The man was bold, and while not fearless, he was braver than most gave him credit for. And though Albus knew consequences would eventually come, he desperately hoped Severus' actions would never be discovered by Voldemort and his followers. It would not end well.

As he pushed that memory away, he went on to the next, certain he was nearly done, but then something *jerked*. He opened his eyes, not liking the jarring sensation he had just experienced and knowing he needed to play it safe and get help. He couldn't risk whatever just happened getting worse. He had too many memories he needed to keep in order and frankly buried.

He turned his head to Fawkes who was looking at him in concern.

"Please send for Severus. I have a feeling this should be handled sooner rather than later," he said.

Fawkes left with a nod, vanishing in a ball of flame.

O o O o O

Severus threw his outer robe across his chair, quite ready to call it a night, when Fawkes flamed right over his shoulder.

He couldn't help but exclaim a surprised curse word as Fawkes gripped his shoulder and promptly whisked him away.

He quickly recognized the Headmaster's office and couldn't help but immediately fear the worst as he turned around to face his mentor's desk. But his fears seemed to be unfounded when he found Dumbledore sitting behind the desk, looking calm and perfectly fine. Severus forcibly quieted his raging heart, wondering at his abrupt summoning given the man's demeanor.

"Headmaster, I trust this is urgent?" Severus managed.

"I'm afraid it is, Severus. You see, I was occluding a moment ago and had to stop. I

believe something is wrong. Could you . . .?" He motioned slightly toward his temple.

Severus frowned, but pulled out his wand and approached the desk anyway.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure, but while I was occluding, I felt an abrupt shift. It's hard to describe, but it was most uncomfortable."

"I'll try to see what's wrong," Severus stated after casting a diagnostic spell and receiving nothing of note. "Ready?" Albus nodded. "*Legilimens*!"

Well, Dumbledore's mind was certainly layered, complicated, and eccentric.

The outer mental shield was a gentle lemon drop waterfall. When Albus' mental defenses were fully raised, it was an intense avalanche of impenetrable yellow candies. Thankful that the Headmaster had toned down his occlumency a bit, Severus continued on, trying to get a feel for what was apparently wrong.

He was almost beginning to think it was in his mentor's imagination when it happened. It was barely noticeable, but it was there.

"It happened again," he heard Dumbledore's voice state.

Severus went further, trying to find where the jolt had originated from when it happened again, directing him to a particular location.

He took a moment to examine what he was sensing, before backing out and ending the spell.

"I believe I understand the problem, Headmaster. Some of your defenses are slipping, and when your magic detects this, it tries to fix it — hence the jolts. I doubt this is permanent or a cause for great alarm, as I can sense your abilities for this magical art are still present and strong."

"What's caused this and how severe is it?" Albus asked.

Severus wasn't surprised by the question. It was difficult for anyone, no matter their expertise, to see and diagnose a problem within their own mental shields. It was why it was strongly advised to ask a trusted occlumens and legilimens for help when a problem was suspected. Sometimes someone on the 'outside' needed to take a look.

"I can only assume this is a result from your recent head injury. We don't fully understand the brain, as you know, but it's clear such injuries can have

consequences in every aspect of the mind. I believe you will just need to re-strengthen and perhaps rebuild a few sections of your defenses. I also wouldn't be surprised if repairing this would aid in relieving some of your other problems, mainly that of concentration."

Dumbledore smiled. "I do believe you are correct, my boy. Thank you."

"As for where the fractures are located, I would focus on recent memories and then go from there. The damage doesn't seem to go too far back, memory wise."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Albus said, privately relieved things were not as serious as he had initially feared.

"No, it shouldn't be, but if you do require my assistance, I'll be in my quarters," Severus said with a gentle nod.

With that, Severus exited through the fireplace, leaving the capable Headmaster to do some mental repairs.

O o O o O

A/N: Sorry this part took so long, but I had slammed into a huge wall of writer's block made of bad lemon drops.

Next part is under construction.

Moving Pieces

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Nitpicking—If you nitpick, how did you get through the original Harry Potter books? Did you keep a notebook beside you to jot down every tiny bit that bugged you? Did you mail it to JKR? Is it even possible for you to enjoy any story at all? Now, don't confuse what I'm saying, I really like intelligent critiques and questions about things I've done with the characters/plot, but questioning me over things I've already explained and (in my view) justified just wastes everyone's time.

Part 26: Moving Pieces

It was July 30th.

Tomorrow was Harry's birthday.

Talk of it had begun the day before, thanks to Remus, and now Pomona, Poppy, and Albus were orchestrating a party for both Harry and Neville. Susan and a few other Hufflepuffs had been invited, and though Draco was mentioned, Severus admitted it may not be wise to include him due to recent events. As much as it pained him to exclude his godson, the reason he had to was clear. The last thing the Malfoy family needed was close access to Harry Potter, even if it was through their son. The Dark Lord would expect them to tell him and be prepared to act on the opportunity. He would not respond well when he discovered they hadn't.

Severus made a mental note to himself to tell Draco of his reasons. The boy would understand if kept informed.

The party would be held at Hogwarts, as it was the most secure location to host it and because everyone had sure access to it (unlike the Flamel's home).

The Flamel's would not be attending, but they had assured Albus that they would be holding a private party for Harry in the near future, just the three of them. Severus was pleased, knowing Harry deserved to experience some semblance of family and that he would get it through the Flamels.

Severus shook his head as his thoughts moved on.

Sirius Black would be coming to the party.

The man had apparently recovered enough to leave St. Mungo's, at least for the

party, and was well on his way to making a (nearly) full recovery. According to Remus, he was still the Black they all remembered — which meant he was still immature, stubborn, and rash.

Oh joy.

Severus was not looking forward to seeing him again, but knew it was unavoidable. However, as he thought about it more, his grimace morphed into a smirk. Black was certainly in for a surprise with Harry. And how would he respond to learning that his godson looked up to old 'Snivellus'?

Hmm, perhaps seeing Black would not be so painful after all.

O o O o O

Harry was excited. The Flamels had informed him of the party the day before. He had already gotten Neville a present and decided to give it to him at their party. It was a Herbology book from the Flamel library. Nicholas had been kind enough to copy it for him.

Unfortunately, the Flamels would not be attending the party. They valued their privacy and felt it best for no one to know who Harry was staying with — thus, they would remain at the cabin. He understood their reasoning, and after their promise of a private party with just the three of them, Harry was happy to let things be.

The other thing he had learned was who would be there. He was happy Susan and a few other Hufflepuffs would be there, including Cedric Diggory, Hannah Abbot, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Ernie Macmillan. He was disappointed Draco wouldn't be there, but understood the Malfoys' current position. He also knew a few professors would be there, including Professor Snape. However, of those attending, the person he was most curious about was Sirius Black, the man who was apparently his godfather.

Nicholas and Perenelle were upfront with him. As things stood now, Sirius Black was not well enough to be anyone's guardian; however, if/when he recovered, Harry would be allowed to choose who to stay with.

Harry wasn't sure how he felt about that, but, if the Flamels' expressions were anything to go by, they hoped Harry would remain with them. Harry's heart had swelled at coming to that conclusion.

"Ready, Harry?" Nicholas asked, entering the room.

"Yeah," he answered, Neville's gift under his arm.

"I've temporarily connected the floo to Albus' office. Just say 'Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts, yellow socks'. The last part is the password. It's very important. Albus will have a portkey for you to return."

"Okay."

"Have fun, Harry, and Happy Birthday," Perenelle said with a hug.

With that, Harry smiled and took a handful of floo powder before doing as Nicholas had said, vanishing in a flash of green.

O o O o O

Severus stood in the back corner, content to simply watch.

Dumbledore, Flitwick, and Madam Longbottom were talking by the table stacked with gifts (for Harry and Neville). Minerva, Poppy, and Pomona were chatting by the cake, no doubt discussing the latest fad in witch apparel. Neville, Susan, Hannah, Justin, Ernie, and Cedric were with Harry on the far side, waiting for the time to open presents and to eat cake while playing 'pin-the-tail-on-the-cat'. Lupin and Black were near another corner, Lupin no doubt there to hold back Black in case he tried to ambush Harry.

He needn't have worried. It appeared the mutt was content to just stare at his friends' boy.

Severus wondered how long Black's stupor would last though.

"Time for presents!" Dumbledore declared, motioning everyone to the table and conjuring two chairs for Harry and Neville.

Severus inwardly rolled his eyes at the old man's enthusiasm as the rest of the children crowded around the table and most of the adults moved to stand a few paces behind. Severus, however, remained where he was. He could see just fine and didn't feel inclined to be any closer to Black than he had to be, or anyone else for that matter.

The gift opening went on, Harry and Neville both receiving items of usefulness and pointlessness. They received a few books, plenty of candy, and a few other items.

Severus had given Harry a book called, 'Medical Potions' and Neville, 'Vital Herbs for

Vital Brewing.' Both boys were clearly ecstatic and thanked him profusely before remembering his 'no gushing' rule. Although he was the only professor who gave them gifts, he was not concerned with 'showing favoritism' as he made his expectations abundantly clear. To put it simply, Harry and Neville's peers would want no gift from him, for fear of displeasing him in not meeting his high standards.

Black glowered at the books but said nothing, no doubt thinking his gift would blow Snape's out of the water.

Thus, Harry opened the next item.

It was a Nimbus 2001. The gift itself wasn't a surprise, nor who it was from. What was was Harry's reaction to it.

Harry's eyes didn't glow as brightly as most would have expected from a boy his age when he removed the wrappings; granted, the last time Potter had ridden a broom was the day Draco had almost lost his life. Fortunately, Severus was certain no one save himself noticed this, especially when the other children began 'ooo'ing over the expensive gift.

"Thanks, Mr. Black," Harry said politely as Cedric practically drooled over the elite broom.

"Please, Harry, just Sirius, not that I'm that serious of a person," Sirius quipped with a large smile.

Severus tried not to roll his eyes but failed. Fortunately, no one was looking at him.

"Your father was an excellent Quidditch player. I wouldn't be surprised if you follow in his footsteps. You'll be able to try out for your team this year," Sirius continued.

"Maybe," Harry agreed, but Severus could tell his heart wasn't in it, even though it was clear he had been touched upon hearing about James.

From there, the present opening thankfully finished and the cake was brought out.

"Hey, Dobby!" Harry greeted as Dobby and two other house elves came out, carrying a gigantic cake between them.

Severus wondered if there was any icing left in the world after the creation of the cake before them. The elves had clearly outdone themselves.

"Hello, Master Harry, sir!" Dobby eagerly greeted while balancing the cake with the

other elves onto the table. "Dobby hopes Master and his friends like the cake!"

"I'm sure we will, Dobby, it looks great," Harry answered, causing Dobby and the other elves to beam.

With cake came more mingling that Severus skillfully avoided, although he was not averse to eavesdropping, especially as Black and Remus approached Harry when the party was nearing its end.

"I hope you enjoy your new broom, Harry," Sirius began, a little awkwardly. "I know some might consider it a bit much, but considering how many birthdays of yours I've missed. . . ."

"I think it's brilliant. Thanks for it again," Harry said, glancing at Remus who was beside Black.

Neville and the other children were either getting ready to leave or politely giving Harry and his Godfather a moment.

"It was my pleasure, Harry," Sirius said with a smile.

Severus wondered if Black knew he was staring stupidly at the boy. Probably not.

"You look so much like James, you know," Sirius commented offhandedly. "Except for your eyes. Lily's eyes."

Harry shuffled uncomfortably, understandably feeling awkward.

"Well, Remus tells me you were sorted in Hufflepuff," Sirius continued, no doubt realizing how he was making Harry feel and deciding to change the subject. "I'll admit, I'm a bit surprised that James' son is a 'Puff."

"Many people are," Harry said with a shrug. "But I told the hat to put me in the best place for me, and it was Hufflepuff."

"So how is Professor Sprout as a Head of House? She wasn't a Head when I was a student here."

"She's great! I'm glad she's my Head of House," Harry said.

Severus wondered why he didn't comment on the lessons she was giving him about magical control. Ah, well, it was the boy's business.

"Is she your favorite professor then?" Sirius asked, interested.

"Well, I do like the way she teaches a lot, but my favorite professor is actually Professor Snape."

Uh-oh . . . this was about to get very interesting.

Severus remained as he was, hoping against hope that Black would not look his way. He didn't. He was too gobsmacked.

Remus didn't seem surprised by Harry's choice, but he was looking at Sirius worriedly.

Hmm, so the former wolf had not forewarned his friend, Severus mused.

"Snape?" Black managed.

Harry nodded, misreading Black's expression as one of confusion rather than shock. "He's brilliant. He's Head of Slytherin and teaches Potions. He's the one who gave me the medical potions book and Neville that book on vital herbs. He's helped me a lot. He's why I got into parselmagic and he also helped me get Coral, see?" he said as Coral poked her head out from his sleeve. Harry suddenly paused, and Severus was able to conclude that Coral had said something to him.

Fortunately, before the situation could spiral out of control, Dumbledore took that moment to approach Harry. Severus wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed.

"Ready to go, Harry? Your caretakers are waiting," he said.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, giving Black a peculiar look before giving him a parting nod. "Good bye, Sirius and Professor Lupin."

"Bye, Harry," they said, though Sirius seemed to be on autopilot.

As Harry was guided away by the Headmaster, Sirius looked to Remus while Severus continued to appear aloof and oblivious to the recent discussion. He watched Harry say goodbye to his friends before they departed.

"He's not what I expected," Sirius admitted as Harry left with Dumbledore.

"I had tried to tell you," Remus said.

Sirius frowned, his eyes sharp with revulsion. "But . . . *Snape*?"

Remus didn't say anything at first, but turned his eyes to Snape, who fortunately wasn't looking at them — though he could feel eyes on him. Remus straightened his

back, coming to a decision.

"He's done a great deal for Harry, Sirius, even saved his life. I think it would be in your best interests to accept that and not try to do anything foolish. I can't say I know Harry very well, but I do know he is extremely loyal to those he cares for. He is a Hufflepuff after all. I think it's time to put aside old grudges."

It took everything Severus had not to start at overhearing Remus' declaration. Since when had the weary man grown a backbone and talked such sense in a 'this-is-how-it-will-be-or-you-will-regret-it' tone?

Keeping his feigned attention elsewhere, Snape was really tempted to glance over and see Sirius' face, but he decided not to risk it. Besides, his imagination was sufficient.

O o O o O

Harry kept pace with Dumbledore who had kindly shrunk his gifts and placed them in a single pouch for him.

This day was by far one of the best days of his life, even with the slightly confusing encounter he had just had with his godfather. This was the first birthday party he had ever had and the fact more people had come than he had expected just made it better. And although he still wished Draco could have come, it had been a nice surprise to see Susan and the others.

"So, Harry, how are you enjoying your time with the Flamels?" Dumbledore asked as they came to the gargoyle in front of his office.

"I like it there a lot. Did Nicholas tell you? He's helped me lift a forth of my block!" Harry said, beaming.

"He told me you had made some progress, but did not elaborate, but one forth? Splendid!" Dumbledore said, quite excited for Harry. "It certainly makes my gift to you even more fitting."

"Gift, sir? You didn't have to. You've already let me and Neville have a party here and —"

"Nonsense, my boy, I want to. Besides, I've had the item in my possession for over a hundred years and haven't used it in nearly a century. I want it to see some use again, and seeing as you're the only person I know who would truly benefit from using it. . . ."

That got Harry's attention, just as Dumbledore knew it would.

"What is it, sir?" Harry asked.

"I'll show you," he said, leading the way up the staircase when the gargoyle moved aside.

Harry followed close behind, Coral sticking out from his sleeve, just as curious as they entered the office.

"This, Harry, is a Modus Cube."

Harry stepped forward, looking at the object now held in Dumbledore's old hand.

It was a clear glass cube with odd little sparkly gears and springs suspended within and strange glowing bubbles floating around its center.

"I was given this when I was in my fourth year of Hogwarts. I had been having some minor problems with overpowering my spells — such as casting a warming charm in my dorm room during winter and setting my bed's curtains on fire. Well, the current headmaster preferred to avoid any further accidents, so arranged this to be placed in my possession." Albus smiled at the memory as Harry tried not to make his amused smirk too obvious.

"Anyway, what you do is cast any spell you wish on or at the cube. Simple dueling spells can even be cast, as the spell's affects will be essentially canceled when it comes in contact with the cube."

"Then what happens?"

"The cube will light up, and, depending on the reaction, it will tell you if you have over or under-powered the spell. Here, go on and cast something. Anything you wish," Dumbledore prompted as he placed it on the corner of his desk.

Harry blinked, before obediently pulling out his main wand.

:Ooo, try that one we found last night. Stupify!: Coral said, excitedly.

:But I've never cast that one before: Harry stated.

:Well, more reason to try it now, then: Coral reasoned. :Besides, it is a simple dueling spell. The book said so:

:Expelliarmus is simpler: Harry pointed out.

:A little boring though: Coral retorted.

:Alright. If it'll make you happy: Harry said, not seeing Dumbledore's amused expression.

Dumbledore did understand parseltongue, after all. Voldemort had made such knowledge necessary.

"Whenever you're ready, Harry," the Headmaster motioned kindly.

Harry nodded, biting his bottom lip as he recalled how to wave his wand for the spell and what the book had suggested one should do for the first attempt.

"Stupify!" he shouted.

A bright red beam shot from his wand, and he had to fight to stay on his feet and not get pushed backward. It struck the cube, but instead of blasting the cube off the desk, the glass shape sucked it up like a sponge and didn't move an inch.

Suddenly, the gears and springs began spinning erratically and the bubbles bounced off the cube's walls before gravitating toward the center and shaking. It only settled after Dumbledore placed his hand on it.

"Well, I'd say if you had hit someone with that stunner they would have been out for at least the rest of the day," the Headmaster stated.

"So I overpowered it, I gather?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Just a bit, but when fighting for one's life, overpowered spells are usually for the best, unless it's a spell that requires very precise control or you're in a drawn out battle."

"Have you ever had to deal with something like that?" Harry asked, unable to fight down his curiosity.

"Yes. Many transfiguration spells need a great deal of control, and using them in duels is a tricky thing, but very useful. As for needing to conserve one's energy in a fight, a few times, but that was a long time ago, before Voldemort."

Harry nodded slowly at that, trying to imagine such a battle.

"Well, now let me show you how to read this," Dumbledore said, refocusing after a moment and pointing to the top inner spring. "You always want this one to stay stationary. If it vibrates, that's alright, but if it twirls, like it had this time, you

overpowered your spell by a factor of at least three. The two springs below this act the same way, but twirl if you've overpowered by a factor of two or above one, depending if one or both move. Remember, it depends on how controlled you want to get at a particular spell. There's only a few spells you want to always get exactly—not under or overpowered—so don't wear yourself out trying to get every spell perfect. It's unnecessary. However, as an exercise, to improve your overall magical control, these springs can come in very handy. The two below these tell you if you've underpowered the spell. They work the same way as the others, though the factors are one half and one quarter instead of three, two, or above one. Follow?"

Harry nodded, already seeing the benefits of this peculiar item.

"Now, the bubbles. These tell you how concentrated your magic was in the spell. For example, *Wingardium Leviosa* requires your magic to be more concentrated than in *Lumos*. This is partly why wand movement is so important in the levitation charm. It allows your magic to keep its 'density' as it travels to the object you've targeted. I won't go further into the theory, as it gets a bit complicated, but that's the heart of it. With your *Stupify*, the bubbles gathered toward the center a bit. This is to be expected, especially for someone at your level. Your magic was thick enough in the spell to solidly hit a target several meters away — I'd say three dozen — but it would be easily deflected by an opponent's shield, such as the charm, *Protego*."

"How do I affect a spell's density?" Harry asked.

"Well, there is a great deal of debate about that. It's slightly different for each individual, but I've found emotion, intent, and focus have a great deal to do with it. You'll need to experiment for yourself to see which affects casting more for you. Nicholas should be able to help you with it. Perenelle may also have some suggestions. She thinks differently than I do."

"Thanks, sir. This will definitely help me."

"It was my pleasure, Harry. I'm glad that it will be of use to someone again," Dumbledore said.

Harry smiled, before his thoughts strayed elsewhere.

"Is there something on your mind, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, well, yeah, I suppose," he admitted as the Headmaster continued to wait. "Well, I was just wondering, I mean, I know it's not really my business, but . . . I was wondering if you're okay after . . . what happened."

Harry was finding it very hard to meet Dumbledore's eyes now, for whatever feeling embarrassed about asking what he felt was a rather personal question.

"Why don't you tell me?" Dumbledore asked, moving back to sit on one of the side chairs and motioning Harry over as he set the Modus Cube back on the corner of his desk.

Harry approached slowly, not exactly sure what Dumbledore was saying.

"I was hit here," Albus said, pointing to the uneven dent at the edge of his brow, edging his hairline. He saw no reason to sugar coat his recent injury. The boy knew more than most of what had happened that night and he felt being honest and straightforward was better than trying to dance around what had happened to him. "Dr. Price went in to get the bone fragments here," he continued, tracing where they had cut for the surgery, which was up and forward along his temple to above his brow — Madam Pomfrey had taken care of healing it afterward, as well as charming his hair back.

"'Doctor'? So you didn't see Healers?"

"No, I went to a muggle hospital. Professor Snape and the others felt the muggle world was a better place to seek treatment, as they have more experience in healing severe internal trauma. They were right. Muggles have remarkable equipment."

"So you had an MRI or a CT scan?" Harry asked as Coral lifted her head.

Dumbledore blinked, a bit surprised by the question and impressed Harry knew of the machines.

"A CT scan. It was how they knew where the bone fragments were. It also helped them decide how to go in. The scan showed a detailed version of the inside of my head, you see."

Harry nodded, deep in thought.

"You have that look again. What are you thinking now?" Dumbledore asked, amused.

"Well, I was just wondering what the doctors would see if they gave the Longbottoms a CT scan," Harry said simply. "I mean, when I tried to see what was wrong with them at Christmas, I got a lot of flashes of their nerves and the inside of their heads. They have a lot of scar tissue and it was really hard to make out specifics, partly because I didn't know what I was being shown. I've done a little bit of research, and

some of it makes sense now, but to be honest . . . I'm still a bit lost."

"Hmm, I too wonder what the doctors would be able to determine . . ." Dumbledore admitted thoughtfully. "Perhaps I could arrange something with Dr. Price in the future, although I'll need to get Augusta's permission first, of course."

Harry nodded eagerly. "Neville would be so happy if they could go to Dr. Price, and maybe if I was shown more detail of what's wrong with them, I could fix it!"

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "We'll see, Harry. Don't get your hopes up though. The Longbottoms have been hurt for a very long time. Even with your amazing abilities, some things cannot be repaired."

Harry sobered quickly at that and nodded. "Yeah, I know, but . . . it doesn't mean I can't try, right?"

Dumbledore nodded softly, privately amazed by the boy's unwavering desire to help with every ounce of his strength.

"Well, Harry," Dumbledore said after a moment, most of his seriousness gone. "Would you be so kind to give me your diagnosis of my recovery so far? I must admit, although I trust Dr. Price, having a second opinion would be of some comfort."

"Sure, sir," Harry said, bringing his hand up and gently placing it at the Headmaster's temple.

Muttering parseltongue under his breath, images quickly flashed in his mind's eye. From the point of entry, he could make out four trails of developing scar tissue. He correctly assumed these were caused by the bone fragments. Two were superficial and ended at very small globs of scar tissue surrounded by slight bruising of the brain. The third ended a bit beyond that. He could also make out faint evidence of Dr. Price's handiwork, areas recovering from the necessary invasive procedure. As for the last trail, it ended behind his right eye and had noticeably more healing left to do. The surrounding tissue, particularly at the bottom and front of where the fragment had stopped, was a mixture of recovering brain matter, scar tissue, and tiny pockets of blood and bruising. Despite all of that, he saw nothing that sent up red flags or caused him to pause in concern or worry. Everything looked as well as could be expected, considering what he knew about brain injuries and his healing intuition. There was very faint swelling still present (which was no surprise) but overall it was a positive testament to the capabilities of muggle doctors.

Having digested the images, Harry recounted them to Dumbledore.

"Extraordinary," the Headmaster said, never growing tired of seeing evidence of Harry's superb parselmagic.

"Um, do you want me to try to heal what I can?" Harry asked.

"Hmm, if you wish. Dr. Price is confident I can heal well enough on my own now, but your assistance would be appreciated, if you're comfortable."

"Okay," Harry said, lifting his hand with Coral once again with a soft smile. "I'll just focus on the bruising. I don't think I can help with the other things, and I wouldn't want to mess anything up in trying."

"Very good, Harry."

Only later would Dumbledore think back and wonder about the wisdom in allowing Harry to heal such a delicate injury, but at the time he felt no unease in agreeing to let Harry try. And even later, when he would question himself, he would be unable to say he should have acted differently or that it had been a bad decision.

And so Harry did his best to alleviate the swelling and bruising that was left. It was a strange undertaking, but he stowed away everything he was learning to perhaps later assist the Longbottoms. He took care of as much of the bruising as he could, but he didn't want to cause too much change at once. He wasn't sure if accidentally causing any of the scar tissue to move would damage anything, and he already knew he had minutely affected blood flow in some areas. There had been no blood clots, but relieving even the tiniest bit of pressure (due to a bruise/swelling) on an artery/capillary had an impact on the surrounding area.

Pulling his hand back, Harry and Coral found Dumbledore reclining back in the chair with his eyes closed, breathing slowly.

"Thank you, my boy. Didn't know I was feeling a dull constant pain until it vanished. Such a pleasant relief now that it's gone."

Harry smiled. "You're welcome, sir."

Once Dumbledore had recovered, or rather gotten used to his improved condition, he retrieved Harry's portkey and Harry returned to the Flamels.

O o O o O

Mr. Lee, former werewolf and active member of the International Confederation of Wizards, took a seat by his coffee table and lifted his pen.

He had just returned from a meeting at the ICW. It had been the last meeting of the summer and the first Albus Dumbledore had attended since his duel with Voldemort.

The representatives were quick to applaud their Head's determination and resolve, and quickly condemned the actions of the Dark Lord and his followers. It was actually more than what Mr. Lee had expected, but it unfortunately amounted to nothing.

Even though their declaration and kind words toward Dumbledore and the Ministry were a surprise and a pleasant difference from how they had handled the last time Voldemort had caused terror, Lee knew the ICW would do nothing more—not unless more nations were under threat or the Statute of Secrecy was at serious risk.

Mr. Lee scoffed at that. Despite what the politicians said to convince the public and themselves that the existence of magic was not in danger of being discovered by the muggle world, the Statute of Secrecy *was. in. danger*. And regardless of anyone's attempts (including himself and Dumbledore) in convincing the majority of the ICW that Voldemort was not only a threat to Britain but one to the very existence of the magical world, it fell on deaf ears.

Oh, the members nodded at the troubling words and gave supportive comments and words of condolences for Britain's suffering, but nothing more. Apparently, the little they had done (agree Voldemort was a bad man) was enough for them.

Mr. Lee sighed. Anyone could say an act was evil and condemn it all day long, but that never stopped the assailant from continuing. It didn't save lives. Although acknowledging wrongdoing was the first step, it should not end there. There must be follow through, there must be commitment and a willingness to use necessary force — and with Voldemort, force was necessary.

Mr. Lee had his sources, and he refused to turn his back on the one he and so many others owed their undying allegiance to — Harry Potter.

And so, this was why he was lifting his ink pen and setting its tip to paper. It was why he had contacted his allies. It was why he had warned his family.

He was going to provide unconditional aid.

The time of twiddling one's thumbs was over.

O o O o O

Severus closed his eyes as he sat down and swirled a calming draught around in his

glass.

It was 2 am on September 1st.

Voldemort's wound was fully healed, but the Dark Lord was now suffering from an 'unknown' ailment. Of course, Severus knew it was an infection caused by the debris still in the mad man's body, but he couldn't say that. No, he had lied to the monster's face, claiming he wasn't certain of the cause yet, but that he suspected the initial treatment of his injury (carried out by Bellatrix) might be involved.

He had left the room, promising to get to the bottom of it as he strained to keep every trace of emotion completely buried as he heard Bellatrix whimper behind him.

That had been the night before last, but it was not what was currently on his mind.

He could feel something was coming. Voldemort was planning something. Something horrible.

He had just returned from Yaxley's Manor after attempting to 'help' the Dark Lord get to the bottom of his illness.

During his visit, Voldemort was strangely collected, despite his fever and constant discomfort. As he cast the diagnostic spells, Severus could feel Voldemort's magic pulsing in anticipation, and Severus knew from experience it was never a good sign.

"Severus," Voldemort hissed.

"Yes, my Lord?" Severus asked after turning to retrieve a pain relieving potion.

"Children's magic is naturally neutral and very adaptable. It is why in times of old, certain . . . rituals were implemented. I do believe it is time for such power to be utilized again, yes?"

"You, my Lord, have the means to do all that you wish and more. I am honored to be a witness," Severus answered smoothly.

Voldemort grinned.

Severus closed his eyes, the implications of Voldemort's words slamming violently into his gut. Whatever his plans, the Dark Lord already had access to a number of children — children he felt expendable.

And, what was worse, Severus didn't know where the children were being kept.

Severus' hand stilled, the liquid in the glass sloshing up and over the rim as he mentally committed himself to a course of action.

O o O o O

The final weeks of the summer had passed quickly, and Harry could hardly believe he was already on the train.

The Flamels' had kept their promise and had held a private birthday party for him, just the three of them. It had been more than anything Harry had expected, and not because it was glamorous or grand. It had been quiet and personal, a time Harry would treasure for the rest of his life. He had never felt so cherished or loved by anyone before. He wondered if this was what being a family meant.

Sirius Black had written to him a few times, and though he had replied, he honestly didn't know what to say to the man. He seemed nice enough and genuine, but relating to him . . . that was a challenge. Harry just didn't see the attraction to Quidditch. Sure, it was a cool game, and he liked watching matches, but the level of clear obsession Sirius had with it was just beyond him. He could also tell in the man's replies that Sirius was having trouble in relating to his 'hobbies' — not to mention that he never mentioned Professor Snape. So, the difficulty went both ways. He wondered if it would get better.

As for the Modus Cube, he and Nicholas put it to good use, stabilizing his power output and improving his overall control of spells as Perenelle kindly critiqued her husband's teaching methods and Harry's methods of focus. This eventually caused Perenelle to teach Harry how to duel in the last two weeks of summer, which Harry enjoyed immensely. Meanwhile, Nicholas promised Harry to begin teaching him Alchemy during the holiday break.

Harry could hardly wait and found himself thinking of a place other than Hogwarts as his home.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, entering the compartment with a blond girl.

"Hi," Harry said, glancing at the blond girl in question.

Her plain black robes marked her as a first year, and her dreamy eyed look made her appear even more lost than he had felt when he had entered the wizarding world last year.

"Oh, this is Luna Lovegood," Neville introduced. "She seemed a bit. . . ." He trailed off, not sure how to complete the sentence without potentially insulting the girl.

"Hello, Harry Potter. Neville was kind enough to escort me away from the Minisic Flubsies. They gather at the tracks of magical trains and can suck you under, you see," she said simply.

"Er, hello. Feel free to sit. I got enough candy for all of us," Harry said, risking a 'is she serious?' look at Neville.

Neville shrugged and took an offered chocolate frog as Luna sat beside him.

Moments later, Draco, Vince, and Greg arrived.

"Hey, Draco," Harry said, already offering sweets.

"Hey," Draco said, plopping himself next to him as Greg sat beside him and Vince on the other side of Neville.

They barely glanced at Luna. She seemed unbothered.

"Good summer?" Draco asked after a bite.

"Excellent," Harry said honestly. "Best I've ever had."

Draco seemed a little surprised. "So no trouble with your relatives?"

"Oh, I don't live with them anymore," Harry said, realizing very few people knew he had been placed with new guardians. "I live somewhere else now, but I can't say where or with who, sorry."

Draco and the others blinked — though Neville had learned of this at the party.

"Well, that's good. They are magical at least though, right? And they're nice?" Draco asked.

"Oh, they're definitely magical, and they're very nice. You know, I think . . . well, I think they might want to make my living with them permanent," Harry said happily.

"That's great, Harry," Neville said.

"I'm glad Dumbledore saw sense and sent you to a better place," Draco said with a firm nod.

Harry decided not to bring up the fact he had been kidnapped, taken to Voldemort, and attacked by a werewolf, and that that was why he had been placed with new guardians. He was fine with that incident not being public knowledge, and it just

wasn't important anymore. So much had happened since then.

Small talk surfaced soon after, and Luna was introduced to Draco and the others. They didn't talk about Voldemort or anything remotely as serious. Instead, they were content to talk about the fun things they had done during the summer and what they were looking forward to that school year. Before they knew it, the train began to slow and it was time to get off.

As the year before, Hagrid was calling the first years to him, and the Prefects were gathering the rest of the students to head to the carriages.

Harry and Neville stayed together while Draco, Vince, and Greg joined the rest of the Slytherins. However, Harry and Neville were soon joined by Susan and Hannah.

"This way," a red headed, Gryffindor Prefect called, leading the way to the carriages waiting for them.

"What are those?" Harry asked suddenly, staring at the creatures in front of the carriages as Coral stuck her head out to see.

"What?" Susan asked.

"Those shriveled horse things in front of the carriages," Harry said, pointing. "Don't tell me you don't see them."

:I can see them, Harry: Coral assured.

"I don't see anything," Hannah said as Ernie and a few other Hufflepuffs came up.

"I see them, Harry," Neville said. "But I don't know what they are."

"See what?" Ernie asked, looking around in hopes of seeing what they were talking about.

"You guys can't see them?" Harry asked, confused.

The people around had stopped, and it was causing quite the traffic jam, so much so that a Prefect came over.

"What's going on here?"

It was the red headed Gryffindor again. Harry thought his name could be Percy — maybe?

"What's pulling the carriages?" Harry asked, slightly exasperated now.

Percy raised an eyebrow, confused. "Nothing pulls the carriages. They're spelled to move as far as I know."

"No, there's these horse things with bat wings," Neville said, stepping up. "They're in front of all the carriages."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you—" he began, only to stop when two other Prefects came up, one Hufflepuff boy, one Ravenclaw girl.

"Something wrong?" the Hufflepuff prefect asked.

"These two say there's creatures pulling the carriages," Percy explained.

The Hufflepuff sighed and the Ravenclaw looked at Harry and Neville with pity.

"Oh, you poor things, to be able to see such beasts at your age!" the Ravenclaw said. "Though, considering . . ." she continued, glancing at Harry's forehead. Fortunately, she was smart enough not to complete that sentence.

"What?" Percy asked, dumbfounded. He was ignored.

"They're called Thestrals. Only people who have seen death can see them," the Hufflepuff explained.

"Can you see them?" Neville asked.

"No, I haven't seen anyone pass, but I know Thestrals are real. I fell into one in my third year. Fortunately someone who could see them explained to me what I had touched. They're gentle creatures, just generally feared because of the . . . death thing."

Harry nodded slowly. "Thanks for telling us what they are."

"No problem, now let's get to the castle before they start dinner without us," he said.

Getting into the carriage, Harry looked out the window and looked at the castle. Neville got in beside him while Justin, Ernie, Hannah, and Ernie followed in after.

"I wonder who else can see them," Susan said, causing Hannah and the others to speculate.

"If you don't mind me asking . . ." Ernie began, looking to Harry and Neville once

they began moving. "Who did you guys . . . see . . . ?"

"My granddad," Neville answered softly.

Harry continued looking out the window, wondering what he should say, if anything. He knew who he had seen die. Greyback.

He could feel the others looking at him now, waiting for him to answer. He closed his eyes.

"It's okay, Harry. You don't have to say," Susan said.

Ernie blanched, suddenly assuming the one Harry had seen die had been his mother. "I'm sorry, Harry, I shouldn't have asked. I was stupid."

"It wasn't my mum," Harry muttered, unable to stomach allowing them to think that. "It was . . . someone else."

That, of course, got their undivided attention, their previous hesitance gone.

"Who?" Hannah breathed.

Harry swallowed, knowing he had to say something now. "I don't care to say, but believe me when I say no one will miss them," Harry stated. "Don't talk about this to anyone. It happened this summer. Dumbledore and the Ministry know, but I don't want it in the Press. Besides, with Voldemort, they have enough to report on."

"Of course, Harry. We promise," Ernie said.

O o O o O

A/N: Sorry this part took so much longer than normal, and sorry for worrying a few of you. I've just been very busy lately, and put that on top of yet another writer's block. . . . Hopefully things will be a bit calmer now. Thanks for all of your kind reviews, they help a great deal and assist in smashing through writer's blocks.

Next part, *True Colors*, is under construction.

True Colors

Friendly Reminder: There are no Horcruxes in this story.

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Dumbledore understanding Parseltongue — In an interview, JK Rowling stated, "Dumbledore understood Mermish, Gobbledegook and Parseltongue. The man was brilliant." From this, I gather it is possible to learn to -understand- Parseltongue, but to actually speak it is impossible/much much harder.

Part 27: True Colors

Severus watched the first years enter, his eyes gliding over their faces, some of which he had come to know well.

Ginny Weasley was the first he unintentionally focused on. She had been a ferocious fighter in Potter's Resistance. She was practically the Light's version of Bellatrix. Unfortunately, Bellatrix outlived her by nine months. She was killed by Avery while defending a safe house from Death Eaters.

Severus turned his eyes away, not about to allow himself to recall how they had found the bodies there. His eyes came to rest on Luna Lovegood, who was dreamily gazing up at the ceiling as they continued down to the front. She had been alive as far as he knew before Harry activated the rune network that sent him back. She had escorted people across enemy lines to safer places and focused primarily on relocating children (who were mostly orphans). That was her forte. She was not a powerful fighter, but her strength was in something often far more useful, especially when things went bad.

Misdirection and illusion.

Severus swore if she had an animagus form it would be a fox.

He gave a slow, content sigh, knowing, despite all things, the future had at least one person who would make it their sole duty to preserve the next generation. No matter what happened.

His eyes strayed, for whatever reason falling to a small boy beside her. Colin Creevey.

Clenching his jaw, Severus was disturbed to find that this Creevey was not the

Creevey he had found so annoying and excitable. The first thing he noticed was the lack of a camera, and the next was the forlorn expression in place of the amazed one the boy had had practically his entire first year at Hogwarts last time. It was quite unlike Colin, but then it hit him. Dennis Creevey, his younger brother, was one of the nine who had been kidnapped.

Severus' closed his hand into a fist as he tried not to let the sick feeling that had suddenly risen within him show on his face.

What was that boy experiencing in that very moment? Was it as Severus feared? Was he surrounded by werewolves — perhaps now one himself?

Suddenly, he was snapped from his brooding thoughts as McGonagall called the first name.

It went just as it had last time, sorting wise, even for Colin Creevey, although Ginny did look dejectedly at the Hufflepuff table. Severus shook his head. He hoped that frankly idiotic crush would pass faster than it had last time.

Ignoring the beginning of the year announcements, he thought back to how this day had gone before. He had to admit this time was much smoother. Last time, Harry and Ron had missed the sorting and had ended up fighting for their lives against the Whomping Willow. Severus really did wish that thing would be chopped, but it had been planted to solely provide Remus secret and exclusive passage to the Shrieking Shack so he could safely transform away from the student population. Or at least that had been the goal.

Severus shook his head, wisely just letting it go. It didn't matter; it was a lifetime ago.

"After centuries of devotedly teaching, Professor Binns has resigned; however, he will be offering private tutoring sessions in the library, if anyone is interested," Dumbledore announced.

There were many snickers at that, as well as muffled sarcastic remarks. Severus didn't blame them.

"Now, let me introduce you to your new History professor," Dumbledore continued, turning to a woman on the other side of Filius. "Professor Cattermole."

There was polite clapping, though Severus had to force himself.

Mary Cattermole. A muggleborn witch who had barely managed to flee with her children to Italy. Mary and her three children had only managed to get there because

of Luna. Her husband, Reginald Cattermole, had been killed at the recently constructed border, trying to get to them.

Severus resigned himself to the fact he really should make more of an effort to get to beginning-of-the-year staff meetings so he wouldn't get surprised like this, but when Voldemort calls. . . .

Well, he could only hope the Cattermoles' future would be brighter than it had been originally.

O o O o O

Harry and the others fell back into the routine of school very quickly, though on the first morning Harry received a curious letter. Confident in the house elves' screening abilities, not to mention the fact Dobby himself checked over all of his incoming letters, Harry removed the letter from the owl's leg.

To: Mr. Potter J. H.

From: Mr. Lee V. Q.

Intrigued, and slightly confused about the order of his name, Harry went on and read the letter.

*Dear **M**r. **P**otter **J. H**.,*

I am not writing to you as a Representative of the Republic of Vietnam or as a Member of the International Confederation of Wizards , but as a man who is grateful to you and sees that it is time I repay some of what you have done for me.

It has come to my attention that you may be in need of some assistance against renegade werewolves and a Dark Lord. It is unfortunate that people such as yourself often obtain such relentless enemies, but take comfort in the knowledge you have also made powerful allies — perhaps more than you realize.

I cannot act in a politically official capacity, as I cannot speak for my country in declaring war against any faction. However, I can act as a wizard committed to aiding one who I am indebted to. International Law cannot touch me in such a case, and, as your deeds have affected more than just myself, once my actions come to light I am confident others will stand and also come to your aid, should you need it.

As for the specific aid I am referring to, it is public support and information. I understand much of this may be more than you can digest, but, no matter your age,

you deserve my support and I refuse to turn my back on you.

Please contact me if you are in need of anything. I will endeavor to provide.

With Undying Allegiance,

Lee V. Quan

Harry of course remembered Mr. Lee. He was the last man he had cured of Lycanthropy at the ICW meeting during the winter holidays. Thus, he took the letter to Professor Snape and asked for some advice.

Professor Snape seemed surprised but pleased by the letter, and advised Harry to not be afraid to ask things of Mr. Lee. Much like the Malfoys, Mr. Lee owed him a debt, and to ignore his support would be insulting. Besides, this was an opportunity that should not be missed.

Harry agreed, and wrote back to Mr. Lee that evening, thanking him for his support and asking what he meant exactly by 'information' and 'public support'. Mr. Lee replied the following day, stating he had a large library of rare magical books as well as many contacts throughout the wizarding world which provided a broad range of useful information. As for the public support, he stated if he was ever given the opportunity, and Harry approved, he would give statements that would positively promote Harry's public image — as such a thing could be a powerful tool in any conflict.

Of course, Mr. Lee's answer went over Harry's head a bit, and Harry once again found himself asking Professor Snape about what it all really meant. The professor summed it up by saying Mr. Lee was offering to be a kind of public liaison for him, and that, considering Mr. Lee's credentials, it would be wise to accept. Harry quickly did so. Mr. Lee was proud.

Harry's Friday lessons with Professor Sprout continued, as did his weekends helping in the infirmary.

He used the Modus Cube a bit with Professor Sprout, but where he was really seeing improvement was actually in his parselmagic. It was certainly stronger than before, as in, more reactive to his intent, so much so that there were times that he found himself healing the patient without speaking any parseltongue out loud. He merely had to think it.

Coral suggested it was because of how much practice he had had with the full block in place, and now that a quarter of it had been lifted, healing was much easier than

before. Harry couldn't help but agree with that assessment, as it did make sense. But no matter the reason, Harry felt it time to really begin looking at the protective aspect of parselmagic.

O o O o O

The following weeks were busy but no more than others during a school year, or at least that's how it was for most people at Hogwarts.

Professor Cattermole was a decent History teacher, well, if compared to Binns she was extraordinary, but that was no surprise. She covered things other than goblins and actually made a real effort to learn her students' names. Overall, the students had no complaints. Harry found himself comparing her to his kindergarten teacher, as she had a soft voice and spoke simply to them.

As for their other classes, they were much like the previous year. Professor Lupin remained the DADA instructor, introducing them to the finer points of hexes and jinxes. Harry enjoyed practicing them on the Modus Cube, which he had shown to Neville, Justin, Ernie, Draco, Vince, and Greg one weekend. They had all taken a turn, but Neville was the only one who seemed to remain interested in it afterwards — partly because it indicated he had cast a few spells with too little power.

Outside of class, Harry continued his correspondence with Black. They remained a bit distanced, but they were getting to know each other better, and Harry could tell Sirius still genuinely wanted to know him. Harry only wished it didn't require so much effort — for both of them. Other than that, Sirius had recently begun job searching. His healers stated it would give him a semblance of normalcy and provide a means for him to 'begin living' again. This bit of news had opened up things between them some more, mainly because Harry was curious about his life before Azkaban — specifically about what he did as an Auror. Unfortunately, Sirius was adamant about avoiding the Ministry now. He didn't want to work anywhere near them, let alone for them. Harry didn't blame him, but it left Sirius with less job options.

Hopefully something would come along soon.

Mr. Lee kept in contact with Harry, sending him brief messages every other week or so, mainly to keep him informed on any pertinent information that may concern him. One example was the progression of the Lycanthropy vaccine. Through the ICW, the cure had reached around the globe by the beginning of October. Every nation now had access to the cure and volunteers were instructing magical hospitals on how to administer it. This news, of course, was relevant enough, but what was more was the fact a number of nations were recommending Harry for the Order of Merlin, First

Class, as well as one for Severus Snape.

Mr. Lee was blunt on his feelings, stating he felt it was about time (his nation had made the recommendation months before). He also added he was certain Harry would be accepted to receive the award within the month. He was right.

Unfortunately, due to school being in session, Harry would need to wait to receive the award that Holiday Break. However, that didn't stop the Daily Prophet from plastering the news everywhere and declaring it loudly with bold text and flashing articles. The only good thing was that they didn't have any recent photos of Harry.

Harry coped with the sudden influx of fame well enough, though that may have been due to Draco and the others discouraging people (at least those close to their age) from yapping about it when he was around.

"It is a big deal, though, Harry," Cedric said.

They were in the common room, working on their transfiguration homework.

"I know, but can't people just let me be?" Harry said with a sigh.

"Harry, you're the *youngest* recipient of the Order of Merlin ***ever*** -and- it's *First Class*. I know it's annoying, but look at it from other people's point of view. Here's a second year who — mystifying history notwithstanding — can use parselmagic to heal critical injuries and *cure* ***Lycanthropy***. Not only that, but the boy is going to receive an Order of Merlin while having asked for nothing. For crying out loud, Harry, anyone else would have asked for — heck, demanded — payment for curing hundreds of people of a previously thought incurable, un-liftable curse. But receiving payment or an award never entered your mind, did it?" Cedric said, shaking his head in amazement.

Harry gave another sigh. "I just don't think that way. I don't know why."

"Just don't judge people's fascination with you too harshly. Whether you like it or not, you are a very intriguing and impressive person," Cedric stated.

That did little to ease Harry's feeling on the matter.

O o O o O

Severus was not having a good week.

With the news out concerning his and Harry's Order of Merlins, he was in a bit of

trouble — or at least he was certain he was or would be.

It had not been common knowledge that he had been responsible for the creation of the vaccine. In fact, only Madam Bones and a handful of Healers from the Ministry had known (other than the professors at Hogwarts). And, at the time, Severus had counted himself lucky in that the news of the vaccine itself was more important than the identity of its creator — himself.

Well, his anonymity was gone now.

Looking at the clock, he couldn't help but cringe. Time to deliver Voldemort's potions.

Heading toward the Dark Lord's room in Yaxley's Manor, Severus expertly avoided getting near any of the werewolves, who, by the looks of them, were not impressed by or happy with the new Order of Merlin recipient.

He swept past Yaxley, who gave him an amused sneer, before disappearing into the Dark Lord's quarters.

"Ah, Severus," Voldemort breathed.

There was sweat on his brow and his cheeks were pale — paler than his natural color. However, he was sitting on a chair, not lying in the bed.

"My lord," Severus said with a bow. "I believe I've made a breakthrough, though I'm afraid I haven't found the cure yet."

Voldemort motioned him over while shooing Bellatrix aside.

Severus glanced at her, finding she was having difficulty keeping her hands steady and that her right shoulder was twitching.

Prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus.

Voldemort was still taking out his anger on her, believing she was responsible for his illness.

Severus barely managed to swallow up his twisted pleasure at the sight before refocusing on Voldemort.

"This potion should help prevent the illness from progressing further, and these should lower the fever and discomfort," Severus said, partly lying as he knelt before Voldemort.

The first potion would not prevent the illness from advancing; instead, it would make it appear that way by alleviating the symptoms while allowing the bacteria to continue multiplying and spreading unhindered. Severus hoped Voldemort would learn the truth too late.

He wasn't sure if this illness would actually kill him, but he was confident, at the very least, if it progressed far enough it would permanently damage his body and, with any luck, the madman's magic — as he could see evidence of damage already.

Voldemort's magic, though powerful, was beginning to struggle to keep the infection at bay. His skin, over where the bullet was, nestled within the over-healed rib, was tender and faintly discolored now.

Voldemort motioned for Snape to put the vials on the side table as he sat up in his chair a bit more.

"Severus, tell me, if I were to absorb a supply of neutral magic, would these potions have any impact?" he asked silkily.

"I am uncertain, my Lord. I would need to know more about the source of this neutral magic, how quickly it would be absorbed, and how much would be involved," he answered swiftly.

Voldemort smiled, his skin stretching tightly against his thin face.

"Very soon, I plan to use the nine children to fortify my power. This infusion will also remove this . . . *illness*," he said, sending a glare at Bellatrix which made her twitch even more.

"So, a ritual, my Lord?" Severus asked, inserting as much awe as he could stomach.

"Yes. This Halloween, the most magic of nights," he said proudly, smirking.

"Hmm," Severus said, thinking on how to answer. He decided to be honest. He didn't know how much research Voldemort had done, and couldn't risk being wrong here. "The potions shouldn't have any effect, if you absorb magic from each child individually."

"I see. Very good then, the ritual calls for that anyway. I will send for you when I need of you."

Severus gave a small, approving smile. "I look forward to receiving your call."

"More than your Order of Merlin?" Voldemort asked after a short pause.

Severus straightened, barely managing to cover his sudden unease.

"My Lord, I—"

Voldemort interrupted him by standing up and towering above him. Severus remained on his knee as he looked up.

"Severus, my servant, you do not need to explain yourself to me. You are very cunning, perhaps more than any other Slytherin, save myself. You have positioned yourself well, for you have gained more influence than any of my other followers — after all, the Ministry has marked you as a hero. What more could I ask for? When we are ready to move, we will be able to strike at the heart of the Ministry and the Wizarding World."

Severus knelt down further, practically placing his forehead on the ground.

"Your approval is all I seek, My Lord," he said, calming his pounding heart before Voldemort stepped back and dismissed him.

O o O

Severus exited the manor after briefly running into Crabbe and offhandedly mentioning he needed to make a stop at Knockturn Alley for some potion ingredients so couldn't stay and chat.

Apparating to Knockturn Alley, he wasted no time in heading toward the shop most would avoid at all costs; however, he soon slowed his pace when he felt tiny prickles at the back of his neck.

He was being followed.

He didn't look behind him, since that would be foolish. Instead, he turned a corner and entered a narrow alley he knew had a good chance of being completely empty. Calling his wand into his hand, he heard his pursuer step into the alley. Severus stopped, keeping his wand concealed.

"Why are you following me?" Severus asked, his stance firm among the shadows.

He only received a snarl in reply before a pulse of magic surged toward him.

Deflecting the spell with a shield, he sidestepped and turned, brushing against a disgusting waste bin before firing a spell of his own and managing to identify his

attacker.

It was one of the werewolves under the command of Ardolf Lowell, who was one of the two werewolf Lieutenants.

"I will punish you for what you have done!" the werewolf snarled.

Deflecting another spell, this one with a slab of concrete from the alley's floor, Severus decided to make quick work of this, a plan quickly forming in his mind as he realized this problem could easily become an opportunity.

Wordlessly, and holding nothing back, Severus advanced.

He rapidly sent forth three spells. One exploded a nearby crate of filth while another blanketed the entire space in blackness. The third hit its mark as Severus reached out, tightly grabbing onto the werewolf as he rotated on his heel.

They vanished with a muffled crack as passersby wisely fled the area.

-Crack-

They appeared in a secluded shack deep in a forest. Severus promptly let the stunned werewolf fall at his feet as he summoned two chairs before levitating the beefy man's limp form into one of them.

"*Petrificus Totalus," he muttered, localizing the spell to specifically function from the man's shoulders to his feet.* "Well now, let's see what you know," he said, pulling out a tiny vial and tipping the werewolf's head back.

With three drops, he closed the vial and enervated his prisoner.

"Where are the nine children kidnapped this summer being kept?" Severus asked, going right to the heart of it.

With glazed eyes, the werewolf answered. "Three of 'em are being held at Macnair's place. Don't know where others are."

"Why don't you know?"

"Each of us were only told one location, depending on the place we would be guarding."

Severus was grudgingly impressed. It was a good strategy.

"So the other werewolves know of the other locations?"

"Yes."

"Who knows them all?"

"Kamalia Rendall, Ardolf Lowell, and the Dark Lord."

"How many locations are there?"

"Three. Rendall told us they separated the children into three's."

"Have the nine children been bitten and turned into werewolves?"

"Yes."

Severus tightened his hold on his wand.

"Do you know what's going to happen on Halloween?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"The ritual."

"What of the children?"

"All of them will be moved to the one location. They will be given to the Dark Lord."

"You are going to allow the Dark Lord to kill nine werewolf children?" Severus asked, barely keeping his voice from rising furiously.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"With the Dark Lord back to full power, we can truly begin increasing our numbers once more. These nine are a necessary sacrifice. They will be remembered."

Disgusted, Severus was tempted to poison the monster and be done with it, but he still needed more information.

"Where will the ritual take place?"

"I don't know. We haven't been told, but we will know on Halloween."

"What is the current state of the children? Are they physically well?"

"They are very well. Fed, clothed, and housed. They must be healthy for the ritual."

"Do you know anything specific about the ritual?"

"It must be done at night."

"Do you know anything else about the ritual?"

"No."

"Very well. *Obliviate*."

O o O o O

"Cotton candy," Severus stated, causing the gargoyle to move aside.

Coming to the door, he lifted his hand to knock, but he needn't have bothered.

"Come in, Severus," Albus called.

Snape entered, quickly finding the Headmaster wasn't alone and appeared to be diligently . . . tinkering on a one inch tall rectangular board on his desk with a pair of tweezers connected to the board by a red wire. And, on the other side of the desk watching, was a black man with short peppered hair.

At first, he didn't know who this person was or why they were there, but judging by the situation, he had an idea of who it could be.

"I apologize for interrupting, Headmaster. Shall I come back later?" he asked, seamlessly recovering from his mild surprise.

"It's not a problem, Severus, we are nearly finished today," Dumbledore answered. "This is my physical and speech therapist, Mr. Lewis," he continued, even as he leaned over his desk, bringing the tweezers closer to the board's surface. "Mr. Lewis, this is Professor Snape, Hogwart's Potions Master."

"Hello, Professor. Congratulations on the Order of Merlin," he said, standing up and holding out his hand.

Severus shook it, just to be polite. The man was helping the Headmaster, after all.

"Thank you," he replied simply.

-BZZZZ-

Severus immediately turned toward the sound to find Dumbledore staring at the board, both annoyed and amused, tweezers in his left hand. Slowly, Severus approached the desk to get a closer look at what the Headmaster was tinkering with and why it had made that irritating noise.

There was an overly simple image of a man on the board with small cut outs throughout his body where shapes of 'ailments' and 'organs' resided, such as a charley horse and spare ribs.

"I'm having him work on his fine motor skills. I find this game, 'Operation,' though considered a children's game, is a useful tool in improving muscle control and coordination. It is also much more rewarding than some other fine motor exercises," Mr. Lewis explained.

"I see," Severus stated, raising an eyebrow as Dumbledore returned to trying to retrieve the stubborn funny bone. Glancing beside the board, he found that the Headmaster had already managed to get a butterfly, bucket, wrench, and an Adam's apple.

"Ah-ha!" Dumbledore exclaimed triumphantly, lifting the tiny plastic funny bone with the tweezers.

Operation successful, Dumbledore put the game aside and, knowing Severus had not come to make a social call, quickly became a bit more serious.

"Mr. Lewis, thank you for coming today. I will do those exercises you suggested. Will I see you next week?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Same time," he said, gathering up the game and giving Severus a departing nod before heading to the fireplace. He was smart enough to know when it was time to go.

With Mr. Lewis gone, Albus motioned Severus to take a chair before massaging his left hand with his right.

Sitting down, Severus took a moment to figure out where to begin.

"I've figured out what the Dark Lord is up to," he said after a moment.

Dumbledore stilled. "Does it involve the children, as we had feared?"

"Unfortunately," Severus answered, before repeating what Voldemort had told him and what he had learned from the angry werewolf.

"Voldemort has certainly gone beyond what even I had thought him capable of," Dumbledore whispered.

"I fear there may be more. His last words to me . . . I think he is planning something serious with the Ministry."

Albus nodded. "I agree with you, especially considering he and his followers have been so quiet of late. However, I doubt they have been inactive. For the past few weeks, the Minister has been acting . . . well, I can't quite put my finger on it, but he is not himself. I am not sure if it is the Imperius or not, but . . . something is certainly off. He has been reassigning people to different departments and has even created a few new positions. Another troubling thing is the assignment of his new Senior Undersecretary — a rather vile woman, a description I do not use lightly, by the name of Dolores Umbridge."

Severus clenched his jaw.

"I don't have any solid evidence to bring my concerns to the Wizengamot, and though I have expressed some of my concern to Madam Bones, I fear I can do nothing to stop Cornelius' aberrant decisions. To most, his actions are a reaction to Voldemort and the problem with the werewolves. They won't fault him for 'doing what he can to help protect the Ministry and Britain.'"

"Idiotic sheep," Severus could help but retort.

Dumbledore didn't comment on Severus' words, but moved on.

"I'll inform Madam Bones of what we know so she will be able to assemble Aurors quickly when I contact her Halloween. She understands the likelihood of there being spies in even her department, so she will be subtle," Dumbledore said.

"Very well. I will inform you of the location as soon as I can that night."

O o O o O

The days went by at a crawl. Severus almost wondered if time itself had been slowed and he was the only one who noticed. At meal times, he kept his eyes away from the Gryffindor table. He did not want to think about Dennis Creevey more than

he had to, or see the Colin Creevey silently worrying over his missing baby brother.

He knew Draco had noticed his tense mood, even though many other students remained oblivious, heck, even most of the professors had no clue he was so overwrought. But he could not explain it to Draco, nor did he have the opportunity to try. Thus, he communicated the best he could with brief looks and subtle nods he hoped would be deciphered as 'yes, something is happening, but you and your family remain safe.'

Halloween finally came, and the feast in the Great Hall was as grand as it was every year for that magical night.

He couldn't stomach eating, and the floating pumpkins over the tables just made him feel sicker.

He would be called soon.

"Severus?" Remus asked, glancing at him with barely disguised concern.

"Yes?" Severus drawled, turning toward him with what he hoped was a bored expression.

"Is there . . ." Remus began, before apparently changing his mind about what to say. "Is there something wrong with the food?"

Severus lifted an eyebrow. "No. I'm just not particularly hungry."

"I . . . see," Remus said, wisely deciding to let the matter drop.

Severus was thankful, especially when he felt his mark burn a moment later.

It was time.

Straightening the portkey-disguised-watch on his wrist, he gave a parting nod to Remus and a subtle look at Albus before heading out of Hogwarts and beyond her wards. Once he was a distance away, he apparated out, allowing his mark to lead him to his destination.

O o O

It took a moment for him to realize where he was, as it had been a long time since he had been on the grounds of Augustus Rookwood's Manor.

After ensuring he was alone, he swiftly cast the patronus charm and sent a quick

message to Dumbledore, informing him of his location. If things went as he hoped, Dumbledore and Aurors would arrive within the hour, and before anything unfortunate happened.

With that done, Severus went forward and entered the manor's wards before going to the back of the house, the place where his mark was directing him toward.

"Ah, Severus, always punctual," Voldemort said.

"Yes, my Lord," he answered with a bow. "Your time is valuable. I try my best to avoid wasting it."

Voldemort smiled as he walked across the bare earth toward him.

Severus took in his surroundings the best he could as he knelt before the Dark Lord.

To his right was a containment ward of some kind. He unhappily concluded it was for the children. Before him and behind Voldemort was an area of land that had been completely cleared. The earth had been gently swept of all debris, and all that was left was rich soil. There were two 1 meter wide circles, each surrounded by an etched rune ring with intricate symbols branching off and around it. Connecting them was a stream of runes that contorted slightly as they meshed with the rings. This was dual rune network with a joining rune channel, and, by what Severus knew of runes (which was a great deal due to helping craft the one Harry had activated to send him back), he saw it enabled life and energy transference.

This did not bode well.

To his left were death eaters and werewolves, and behind them was the manor. There were not many Death Eaters present, though that was understandable as Voldemort did not want to flaunt his injury. Also, most of the 'free' Death Eaters were at Halloween Parties, keeping up appearances.

"Rise, my loyal servant," Voldemort said, giving one of the werewolves beside him a nod.

Severus stood as six children were brought from the house and placed into the containment ward by Kamalia Rendall and Ardolf Lowell, the werewolf lieutenants. He turned toward the children and gazed at them without any emotion showing on his face, although inside he was boiling and wondering where the last three were.

"Severus, would the children having Lycanthropy pose any problem to me during or after the rituals have been completed?" Voldemort asked, his eyes holding a

disturbing glint as he glanced at the children.

"I don't believe so, my Lord, as you have Lycanthropy immunity through having Dumbledore's blood running in your veins," he answered after a thoughtful pause.

Voldemort nodded. "As I thought. Now, I expect Dolohov to arrive with the last three children soon, but we must complete the rituals within the sacrificial window. Ardolf, bring one of the children to the far ring," he said while motioning for a few of his servants to gather around the dual network.

Severus' stomach tightened. He had already set himself to stalling the ritual for as long as he could, but actually doing it was a serious risk. He only hoped it would be worth it and that help would arrive in time.

"My Lord," he interrupted, bowing deeply. "Forgive me, but may I make a suggestion?"

The Death Eaters near stared at Snape with wide eyes, stunned by his daring, while the werewolves stilled.

"And what suggestion would that be?" Voldemort asked.

"I believe it may be best to wait for Dolohov so you may select the best child to be used first. I believe placing the children in order of highest power and health would provide you with the optimum energy transference — as your body would no longer require any attention after the first absorption."

Voldemort paused, thinking over Severus' words.

"That may be . . ." he said. "Very well. Begin examining the children already here and place them in the optimum order."

"Yes, my Lord," he said.

Walking to the trapped children, he kept his face passive, knowing he was being watched.

He knew there was about thirty more minutes before he could begin to hope for Aurors to arrive, so resigned himself to continuing his charade.

Kamalia Rendall brought the front of the ward down so he could check the children over. Pulling out his wand, he began casting diagnostic spells and charms that would give hints to how closely tied a child currently was to their magic. He knew them

being werewolves would skew the results some, but this was for show more than anything else.

The children were healthy and strong, but it was clear they were terrified. They didn't move at all as he cast the spells on them, and even their breath, which appeared as pale fog in the cold night air, was slow and hesitant.

They averted their eyes from his, which only made his heart clench further. Looking at their faces, he recognized a few as future students; however, Dennis Creevey was not yet present.

"You," he snarled, wishing he did not need to keep up his Death Eater persona in this instant, "Stand here."

The child he pointed to did as he was told immediately. Severus could tell they had been conditioned to obey without question. There was no sign of having been bewitched, but being in captivity since the summer had squashed any resistance they might have originally had.

Severus continued his work, placing the children in the 'optimum order' to be sacrificed.

He did it as slowly as he dared, deliberately placing the children in the order he felt would enable them the best chance of escape, if the ward were to drop. He only hoped their sense of survival was still strong enough to have them run if they were given the opportunity.

As he finished getting the six in order, the last three arrived.

He turned to find Antonin Dolohov and Rodolphus Lestrange bringing the children to him at Voldemort's nod.

Severus guided the children into the warded area, his eyes taking in their faces. They were just like the other six, too frightened to resist or even cry. Dennis Creevey was among them, and Severus had to strengthen his mental shields to hold back the rush of rage that surged at seeing the once hyper boy so defeated.

Casting the spells he had on the others, he examined them and began forming a plan to execute.

If Dumbledore and the others did not arrive in time, he had to prevent the rituals from taking place, his position as spy be damned. He would not stand by and watch more innocents be murdered and Voldemort regain his strength — not if he could do

something to stop it.

He had forced himself to do such things in his future, believing his position as spy was worth the price, that his work as a double agent was saving more lives in the end — when in truth . . . had it been?

Was the information he was gathering for the side of Light worth the lives of those he watched Voldemort murder right before his eyes? Now, he wasn't reckless, far from it, but there had been a few times when he could have acted . . . when there had been a good chance he would have been able to save a few lives *and* escape with his own. But he had refused to take the risk and reveal himself as a spy, believing the information he was gathering was worth far more than a few lives — whether they were adults' or children's.

But now, looking back, Severus was not so sure of the worth of his work. Oh, it was valuable, no doubt, but was it equal to a life? Any life? How much damage could his defiance have done if he had acted in such a moment, especially near the beginning of the war? Who else would have joined him if he had shown that one did not have to obey, shown fellow victims of the Dark Lord that one could fight back and live? Would fellow Death Eaters have turned? Would frightened civilians have risen up before it had been too late?

He didn't know, but if now was the time to drop his act, there was no better time to find out.

He looked down at Dennis Creevey, finding his clothes shabby and torn, but a trace of color on the boy's wrist under the sleeve of his robes caught his eye.

His heart hammered wildly in his chest as his plan solidified further.

He gripped Dennis' wrist as he finished casting, making it appear he was squeezing him tightly when in actuality his hold was loose and gentle. Then, with a mutter, he performed the Switching Spell. He felt his wrist watch appear beneath his hand around the boy's wrist and a thin bracelet of colored twine replace his watch.

Then, pretending he was casting another diagnostic spell, he quietly ordered, "Ignore it."

Dennis's face didn't react, but Severus felt the muscles in his arm tighten as he clenched his little fist.

"Are you finished, Severus?" Voldemort asked behind him, a bit of impatience clear in his voice.

"Yes, my Lord," Severus answered, knowing he could not stall any longer.

Where was Dumbledore? !

"Bring the first," Voldemort ordered.

Severus stood up and indicated Dennis as the first. "This one," he stated.

"Perfect," Voldemort said, moving to the rune network and entering the circle that the energy from the other would flow into.

Dennis was then steered by Dolohov into the other. He was rigid and breathing heavily. Severus was certain the boy fully believed he was going to die.

Severus stepped back, overtly glancing around and identifying who his first targets would be if he had to act.

Kamalia Rendall and Ardolf Lowell were by the containment ward, keeping it up. Bellatrix was on the left side of the dual network, anxiously watching Voldemort. Pettigrew was beside her, looking like a disgusting, fat doll more than a living person, and Rodolphus was with the few other Death Eaters near the upper portion of the network with the rest of the werewolves.

Continuing his careful inspection of the area, his eyes caught a bit of movement behind Voldemort, just outside the ring.

Nagini.

Severus tightened his grip on his wand. She might be a problem.

Finally, Dolohov exited the ring, leaving Dennis standing alone at its center facing a pleased and eager Voldemort. All the while, Severus was wondering what in Merlin's name was taking Dumbledore so long. They were running out of time!

Time passed agonizingly so, and it was only as Voldemort's wand fell from his sleeve and into his hand when Severus knew. . . .

It was now or never.

His magic bubbled at his center as his heart throbbed in his chest, his mouth opening just as Voldemort raised his wand.

"*Avada Ked*—" Voldemort began, thrusting his wand forward as Severus' voice cut over his.

"Non adorabis!" Severus yelled, declaring the activation phrase of the portkey.

Dennis' form vanished an instant before he would have been struck by the Unforgivable, causing the green curse to continue and strike a surprised and unlucky werewolf.

Severus did not wait for any of them come to their senses, but took advantage of their brief stupor.

"*Sectumsempra*!" he hissed, slashing his wand down where Nagini lay, plunging as much magic as he could down through his wand.

Blood filled the air as he turned, instantly casting a *Diffindo* directly through Ardolf Lowell's chest and bringing him down. The containment ward flickered.

Now was not the time for mercy.

Voldemort gave a cry of absolute and unrestrained fury as he twisted around. Severus barely had time to duck and roll as spells were finally cast at him, but the fight had only begun. The air crackled with apparition cracks just beyond the property wards of Rookwood Manor, and it was soon followed by the ominous sound of straining wards.

Dumbledore and countless others had finally arrived and were attacking the perimeter.

"HE'S MINE!" Voldemort roared, his eyes blazing as his magic pulsed from his frame and visibly contorted the air around him — the fog of his breath twisting.

Unlike all the others within the ward, Severus did not freeze at Voldemort's words. Instead, he took the opportunity to strike down an ill prepared Kamalia Rendall with another well-aimed *Diffindo*.

"Get down!" Severus shouted at the kids as the ward around them went down.

Fortunately, they obeyed him instantly, but his order to them gave Voldemort an opening.

"*CRUCIO MAXIMA!*"

Though invisible, the power of the spell caused the air around it to ripple as it went forth.

It did not miss.

It struck Severus in the chest, right above his heart, and he was slammed back just by the fierce power behind the spell; however, he remained on his feet, even as Voldemort stepped forward, keeping his wand trained on him and his focus constant.

Severus' muscles, overwhelmed by the sheer magic coursing through him, clenched tightly at the assault, but his eyes stared unwaveringly into Voldemort's own as the spell remained active.

The sensation was beyond anything Severus could ever describe.

"This is only the beginning of the pain you will suffer, Severus," Voldemort began, forcing even more hateful power into the spell.

But Severus had yet to scream, had yet to fall at his feet and writhe on the ground, even though he continued to hold the spell on his once 'most loyal' follower.

Severus didn't know what was happening, but the pain Voldemort was claiming was only the beginning of what he would suffer did not feel all that painful. And though he could feel the monster's raging magic dancing just under his skin and across his core, it did not feel like a *Crucio*, let alone a *Crucio Maxima*.

Was this a result of Voldemort's magic suffering from the illness, or was it something else? Severus could only hope it was Voldemort's magic, but, whatever the reason, he couldn't ponder on it now. There were more pressing things to do, like survive.

He straightened, making Voldemort lift his eyebrows.

"No, Voldemort, this is only the beginning of your defeat," Severus replied defiantly as he moved and cast as if the Cruciatus was not still upon him, to the shock of Voldemort and all bearing witness. "*Reducto*!" he shouted as the wards suddenly crumbled around them.

Voldemort was forced to defend himself, deflecting the curse into the center of the rune network. Earth exploded upward as Aurors surged onto the property, immediately engaging the Death Eaters and werewolves in combat.

The scene quickly caved into the inconceivable reality of battle, and Severus' only thought was of the children caught in the middle of it. Rolling to avoid an ill-aimed curse, Severus made it to the huddled children who had yet to move after his order of 'get down.'

Sweeping his wand over their heads, he cast the strongest protective ward he could

think of as he heard the voice he had been waiting to hear since he had left Hogwarts.

"So, this is more of your 'greatness'?" Dumbledore asked, stepping up to the right of the Dark Lord as he glanced at the ruined rune network on the ground.

Severus looked up just in time to see Voldemort's pale face whiten further.

"Unlike others, I am able to pursue such magic," Voldemort retorted, feigning calmness as he turned to fully face his first enemy — Severus momentarily forgotten.

"You believe it is about ability? No, it is about willingness. You are merely an individual willing to perform such vile acts, violating magic herself," Dumbledore stated, lazily sidestepping a stray curse in his purple robes.

The passing spell made the stars on his robes sparkle, almost as brightly as the twinkle normally in his eyes.

Voldemort scoffed. "You are confusing people's weakness for unwillingness. They are too weak to seek power, and thus, they are unworthy."

"And yet many who you consider weak have power you will never know."

"Going to continue the old argument, are you?" Voldemort asked with a sneer.

"An argument I have already won? Why bother? No, I am merely stating truth. After all, love has defeated you before, and it will again," Dumbledore answered confidently.

With a snarl, Voldemort fired a Killing Curse, which was intercepted by a slab of earth guided by a flick of Dumbledore's wand. But Voldemort's assault did not mark the beginning of a duel, but a retreat.

Voldemort fled with a loud resounding crack, which was soon joined by his followers' — Death Eaters and werewolves alike.

With the battle over, Severus felt it best to slowly reveal his presence and that of the children he had hidden with the quick but messy protective ward during the short skirmish. Rising up to his full height in front of the children, he kept his wand pointed down and tried his best to look nonthreatening. Of course, his dark menacing clothing and naturally intimidating stance did little to assist in this.

The Aurors immediately aimed their wands at him, several looking uneasy as they realized how close he was to the children.

"Severus," Albus said, quickly moving forward while ignoring the confused looks from Bones' men. "Are you and the children alright?" he asked, stopping just in front of Severus before reaching out and grasping his shoulder.

Severus gave a short nod as the children gathered more closely around him, some of the younger ones even daring to grip the sides of his black robes.

"One child is at Hogwarts, Headmaster. I sent him by my portkey," he answered, choosing to not comment on or acknowledge the eight children clinging to him.

Severus was just glad they weren't crying.

"Very good," Albus said before turning toward Madam Bones who was on her way toward them. "Well, I suppose some explanation is in order?" he asked when she reached them.

"That's one way to put it," Madam Bones muttered.

O o O o O

Next part, *Gain and Loss*, is under construction.

Gain

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Voldemort being a special kind of wizard: Mage/Warlock/Sorcerer — Yes, though I did not explicitly say so, he is a Mage; however, unlike Harry, he was born as a 'Mage', which means he had access to all of his magic the moment he had been born-which is why he had such control when Dumbledore first met him.

Part 28: Gain

Professor Sprout was not ashamed to admit that she was grateful that the Halloween festivities had finally come to an end and that it was time to call it a night. It was well past midnight and Minerva had informed her a few minutes prior that the Headmaster was away from Hogwarts on Ministry business and would return by the morning. This was hardly unusual, so, after checking on her Hufflepuffs, she began getting ready for bed.

Unfortunately, right when she was about to retrieve her comfy bed robes, urgent pounding began rattling her door.

Hurrying to the door, she opened it to find a wide-eyed Ernie Macmillan.

"Professor, come quick, there's something wrong with Harry!" he said, clearly beside himself as he waved his arms about.

Immediately following him, they hurried to the second year boys' dormitory.

Entering the room, she found all but one of the boys out of bed.

Zachariah Smith and Justin were standing at the foot of their beds, staring at the bed across from Ernie's, and it was easy to see why.

Neville was leaning over Harry who was, frankly, hysterical.

Pomona Sprout had no other word to describe it.

He was covered in sweat and shivering violently. With Neville's help, he was barely sitting up and his hands were shaking uncontrollably as he pressed them against his forehead. However, that was not the worst of it. Tears were on his cheeks and his breathing was hitched and being further interrupted by fitful, uneven *giggles*. He appeared utterly mad, and it understandably frightened Sprout.

"What's wrong with him?" Smith asked, in a tone that would be used to ask about a bug rather than a person.

Professor Sprout chose to ignore him and hurried beside Neville, as Harry was closer to that side of the bed.

"Mr. Potter, can you hear me?" she asked, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder as Neville backed away.

Harry nodded uneasily, gritting his teeth as a strangled chuckle bubbled in his throat.

"Let's get you to the infirmary," Sprout decided, already pulling the blankets away as she sighed. "Too many sweets, I'm afraid. Too much sugar can sometimes do this." Of course, she didn't believe this was the case and was merely saying this for the benefit of the other boys.

Harry clumsily slid his legs off the bed, his entire frame still trembling, so much so that Sprout had to support him.

"Sorry," he managed as Coral slithered off his pillow and went around his wrist.

"It's alright, Harry, you're not feeling well," Sprout assured.

Sprout helped guide Harry out of the room as she turned to speak to Neville and the others. "Try to get back to sleep, and don't worry, Madam Pomfrey will tend to Mr. Potter."

The boys hesitantly returned to their beds, Neville the last to do so.

Sprout guided Harry through the halls, his heavy breathing calming slightly step by step. Finally, she felt it time to speak.

"Harry, what happened? Despite what I had said, I know this has nothing to do with too much sweet intake."

"It's Voldemort," he answered, clenching his teeth as another wave of . . . something assaulted him.

Professor Sprout of course knew of Harry's connection to the Dark Lord, but seeing further proof of it was still unnerving.

"Right now, he's angry," Harry began before pausing. His expression shifted into one of grim satisfaction. "Actually, he's beyond furious."

"Do you know why?" Sprout asked as they neared the infirmary, slightly concerned by his expression, which only became more alarming as he actually smirked.

"He was betrayed," Harry whispered, before grimacing from another sensation in his scar.

O o O o O

Dennis woke up, finding himself still in the bed that the lady calling herself Pomfrey had guided him into hours before. She had seemed nice enough, giving him something to eat and telling him he was safe before having him take a potion to help him sleep — but then, *they* had been nice at first too.

He had no idea where he was and only knew he was there because of the watch the man had placed on his wrist, so, for now, he would do what he knew worked.

Obey.

It was the safest option, he knew this from experience, but he also knew it brought little to no comfort. Thus, to his undying shame, he soon found himself pulling up his knees and fighting back tears.

Where was he? Where were the other children? What was going to happen to him here? Would he ever actually see his family again? Was he finally going to die?

Suddenly, he heard a soft hissing noise coming from the bed beside his own.

He froze.

The last time he had heard any hissing. . . .

Dennis immediately closed his eyes and held his breath, hoping the darkness of the room would cloak him.

"Are you alright?"

Dennis didn't dare move, even though he was surprised by the young voice and its nearness.

"You don't need to be afraid. No one will hurt you here. My name's Harry, what's yours?"

The honesty in the voice was the only thing that prompted him to open his eyes and glance at the bed beside him. There he found a boy a few years older than himself,

looking at him with gentle eyes.

"I'm Dennis," he answered.

"Hello, Dennis."

"Um, where are we?" he asked, easing his knees back down.

"We're in the infirmary of Hogwarts, a magic school. I'm a student here, second year."

"Are we alone?"

It was an important thing to know, at least to Dennis.

"For now. It's really late."

"Um, so why are you here? Are you sick?"

"I had a pretty bad headache," Harry said with a half shrug. "I get them ever so often."

Dennis got the feeling that wasn't the whole truth, but he didn't feel it important enough to wonder about it further.

"How are you? Madam Pomfrey said you arrived here through Professor Snape's emergency portkey," Harry continued.

Dennis blinked, not sure how to reply to that.

"I'm okay."

"Are you? It is okay not to be, you know. I could help you if you want."

Dennis frowned, sensing there was a bit more behind those words than idle kindness — that there was an actual desire and ability to provide genuine assistance. It was strange, because he found himself actually believing Harry could help him.

But he didn't deserve to be helped.

Dennis slowly moved his left hand to his right forearm, his fingers brushing across an ugly scar obscured by shadows. His hand stilled, the risen scar tissue feeling oddly cold as he clenched his jaw even as he wished he could accept Harry's help, whatever it involved.

But he knew he couldn't.

It wouldn't be right.

He was a monster.

"You can't help me."

Dennis' tone was strong and unwavering, the opposite of how he was really feeling inside, knowing he could not show weakness, especially in this. No one could help him, and no one should. He was dangerous. The fact that the evil within him only surfaced once a month was immaterial and changed nothing.

Help was beyond him, and that was the way it should be for creatures like him.

"I don't believe that."

Dennis couldn't help but jump by the older boy's sudden response. Despite the quiet volume, it held an unparalleled power, an undeniable force that was both fierce and compassionate. He locked eyes with Harry, not sure of what he would find in the luminous green.

Harry slowly got off the bed and approached him, before coming to a stop just a foot away.

Dennis didn't move, didn't breathe.

This Harry, this 'second year', was unlike anyone he had ever met before, he could feel it, and part of him was frightened.

What was he going to do?

"Please let me help you, Dennis. I know you have no reason to, but trust me."

"How can you help me?"

Harry didn't answer right away, but finally replied, "I know what's inside you. You were probably told it is permanent, but it isn't. I can destroy it, if you want me to."

Dennis was astonished, his eyes widening as he tightened his hand over the hideous old bite mark. "How do you know?"

"I can use something called parselmagic. It has made me more sensitive to certain things and allows me to heal and cure."

"And you can really destroy it?" he asked, refusing to even hope just yet, especially as all of this was happening rather quickly and was a bit unbelievable.

"Yes, and it only takes a second now. I've had a lot of practice."

"Practice?"

"I've healed sixteen people, most of whom had Lycanthropy for many-many years."

Dennis couldn't believe what he was hearing. It went against everything he had been told for months, defied the words of his captors and filled him with an odd sense of . . . nothingness.

It was beyond comprehension, beyond understanding.

If what Harry said was true, that this . . . internal beast could be eradicated, did that mean he was separate from it? Was it possible that he was still himself — that he was not this revolting monster?

"Dennis?" Harry asked.

Dennis suddenly realized he had been silent for too long.

"Sorry, it's just. . . ." He trailed off, unable to think of any adequate words.

Harry held out his hand, his pajama sleeve going slightly beyond his wrist.

"It doesn't hurt, and it'll be over in a flash," Harry said.

"And you just need to hold my hand?" Dennis asked, feeling a little foolish by asking such an odd sounding question.

"Hmm, I suppose I could. I've never tried it that way, but I don't see why it wouldn't work," Harry said.

Dennis tentatively took Harry's offered hand, deciding he had nothing to lose. "Okay."

And with that, something happened Dennis would never forget.

Harry smiled and his hand tightened around Dennis' smaller one as white light overtook the bright green of his eyes in a brilliant flash. And in that moment Dennis felt thick warm power surge through him, like an ocean wave, engulfing his very center in a blanket of righteous but tender fury before something dispersed like

gentle dust.

And then it was over.

He felt lighter and in his heart he knew that Harry had done just what he said he could do.

The monster had been slain, and he, Dennis Creevey, was free.

O o O o O

Severus and Dumbledore finally departed from the Ministry and flooed to Hogwarts, entering Albus' office.

It had taken several hours to get everything sorted at the Ministry, including the care of the children. Severus inwardly seethed. It was obvious that the children had been traumatized. He really wished he had been able to dish out more lethal spells. . . .

But concerning the children, the Ministry was now in the process of contacting the parents and arranging their transportation. They had already carried out physicals and had learned all of the children had been bitten. Fortunately, they were able to give them the cure soon after the Lycanthropy tests came back positive. Dumbledore assured them that Madam Pomfrey would provide the cure to Dennis Creevey soon (who would remain at Hogwarts for the moment as there was no point in relocating him elsewhere until his parents had been contacted).

Stepping to the side to allow his mentor to pass and move behind the desk, Severus looked up and couldn't help but give Dumbledore a questioning look.

Other than answering countless questions, peeling off children gripping his robes, and enduring much scrutiny from people who were not so quick to believe that he was in fact a spy for the Light, Severus had noticed something peculiar during the whole escapade.

Several people had appeared a bit leery of Dumbledore, nervous and, yes, even afraid. The Minister especially. What was even stranger was the amused glint in a few people's eyes, including Madam Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt's. What in Merlin's name had he missed?

"Is there something the matter, Severus?" Albus asked as he sat down and took a moment to straighten his bowl of lemon drops.

"Headmaster, I couldn't help but notice that a few people, including the Minister,

seemed to be . . . subdued in your presence," Severus said, his voice holding a questioning tone to it.

"Ah, yes . . . about that. . . ." The old wizard actually looked a tiny bit embarrassed, though it quickly shifted to resigned determination. "Cornelius was being, well, difficult prior to our arrival to Rookwood's Manor. He was not convinced 'the intelligence' was genuine, as I refused to reveal you as the source. I believe he was also put out about being kept out of the loop for so long about the plan."

"I had wondered what was keeping you. If you had been any later, I'm not sure what would have happened," Severus said. "I gather you convinced Fudge to let you all go, and that that is the cause of some people's sudden unease?"

"Yes," he admitted before retelling the events.

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"I will not allow it, Albus! To use Ministry resources in such a manner is irresponsible. I cannot allow anyone, no matter their status, to dictate where and when Auror forces go, especially when it is being directed by an unknown source of 'intelligence'!" the Minister huffed, straightening in his new office chair.

"Cornelius, time is of the essence, we must leave now," Dumbledore argued. "Trust me; my source is correct in this. If we want to rescue the kidnapped children, we must go."

"Minister, I don't see why we cannot just go and take a look," Madam Bones put in. "What harm would there be in that? At least this way we can be sure. Besides, I think it is worth checking, for the sake of the children."

"We have no evidence they are there or, sadly, even still alive," Madam Umbridge interjected, her sickeningly sweet voice grating on everyone with sense in the room.

"They are alive, all nine of them, at least for the moment. Cornelius, I will go with or without Ministry support," Dumbledore stated.

"Really, Albus, I cannot allow you to trespass on private property, inhabited or not. We all must follow the law, after all, even you."

"Even at the expense of innocent lives that are at this very moment being held captive by ruthless criminals?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes flashing. His patience was running thin. "The purpose of law is to protect citizens, not keep favor with political allies."

"Now see here, Dumbledore, to cause such a stir at this time of night, and on this night in particular . . . are you quite well?" Cornelius asked as Madam Umbridge leaned forward, as if to get a better look at Dumbledore.

"He does seem a bit peaky," Umbridge said, her voice dripping with fake motherly concern.

The Headmaster stepped forward, at this point beyond caring who was watching or what they might think.

"I am quite well, thank you, just a bit disgusted by the lack of sense from certain government officials," Dumbledore said, his voice not rising in pitch or volume, but power. "Are you going to continue acting like an ignoramus?" The candles in the room flared. "You may be Minister, but I am the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, and Vanquisher of the last Dark Lord. Who would the public support if word came out about your failure to act?"

Fudge sputtered.

"How dare you insult and threaten the Minister!" Umbridge hissed, her previous sweetness vaporizing.

Dumbledore didn't even bother to respond to her, which just infuriated her further.

"How do we know you are in your right mind and did not simply imagine this 'source'? After all, we have your age and injury to consider," she went on, actually taking a step toward him and getting in his face, as if to intimidate.

Dumbledore continued to ignore her (and her cloying perfume), staring right at Fudge over her toad head. Umbridge fumed.

"Well, Minister? I am normally a patient man, but when it comes to the lives of children, I fear I am unable to rein in my rage at such displays of blatant lack of concern or care," Albus stated.

The curtains behind the Minister's desk caught fire and the candles around the room flickered violently. Umbridge gave a shriek as the others in the room gaped. Dumbledore paid none of it any mind.

"In my many years, I have been informed of the passing of many children, personally witnessed several deaths, and endured the worst of all — finding the young bodies of those I was too late to save. So, Minister, act as you see fit, and I . . . I will act as I see fit. I refuse to allow a petty man to take up any more of my time. Try to stop me and you will personally discover why it is said I am the only wizard Voldemort fears."

With that, he rotated on his heel and headed toward the door, even as the curtains crumbled to ash around the Minister. Fortunately, the fire did not spread and slowly went out as wax dripped onto the floor from the candleholders all over the room.

"W-wait, Du-Dumbledore!" Fudge cried.

Dumbledore paused at the door and glanced back.

"Take Madam Bones and some Aurors with you," Fudge relented, his voice wavering as he put his hand up to his temple with a frown.

"Why, thank you, Cornelius," Albus said, before continuing on as if he had just had a calm and normal conversation with the Minister.

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"Well, that certainly explains a few things," Severus stated as Dumbledore sighed.

"I lost my temper."

"Any sane man would have, besides, if you hadn't, things may not have gone so well," Severus said, knowing Dumbledore was worrying that his head injury was partly to blame for his rather flamboyant reaction.

After a moment, Dumbledore nodded, deciding to just move on as he stilled and his eyes settled on Severus.

"You saw it, didn't you?" Severus asked after a long moment.

"Riddle's failed curse? Yes, though I admit I am having trouble believing what I saw. Are you truly alright?"

Severus nodded. "I believe so, though I don't understand how. There was barely any pain, and what little there was was more a mild irritation than anything else."

"No idea at all?"

"Part of me wants to say it may be his magic weakening, but there was still plenty of power behind his spell. I felt his magic surging through me, just under my skin, but it didn't hurt, and it certainly should have."

"Very strange. Well, just to be on the safe side, let's have Madam Pomfrey examine you."

"Of course," he said before Dumbledore called a house elf and asked them to notify Madam Pomfrey to come to his office.

A few minutes later, she arrived with a case of healing supplies.

"Madam Pomfrey, I am not injured," Severus stated, a little amused by her preparedness.

"I'll be the judge of that," she said, taking out her wand and waving it over him.

She paused.

"What is it, Poppy?" Dumbledore asked.

Pomfrey shook her head. "I'm not sure, but would you mind telling me exactly why you called me to examine Severus?"

"Forgive me. We wanted to make sure he is suffering no ill effects from Voldemort's failed spell," Dumbledore calmly explained.

"And that spell was . . .?" Pomfrey prompted.

" 'Crucio Maxima'," Dumbledore replied, though his voice no longer held complete calmness.

"Good Merlin!" Pomfrey exclaimed, immediately waving her wand again, this time casting a more precise and powerful diagnostic charm.

She stilled, frowning at her findings.

"Madam Pomfrey, would you care to share?" Severus asked after several seconds had ticked by.

"Oh, yes of course. I'm sorry; I'm just trying to make sense of this," she said. "There is evidence of the curse, a great deal, actually, but the nerve damage that I should

be finding along with it isn't there, and that makes no sense considering how much curse residue is present."

"So something was preventing the curse from reaching the nerves? That would explain why there was very little pain," Severus mused.

"Here, let me see something," she said, motioning Severus to hold out his hand so she could do a more in depth scan.

Dumbledore and Severus watched her work, eager for her to explain what was going on.

"That's odd," she said.

"Your informative information is mindboggling," Severus nearly sneered, fatigue making him even more impatient.

Pomfrey ignored his sarcasm and looked up at them. "I'm detecting Harry's magical signature, and there's some kind of magical . . . coating covering all of your nerves. That must be what has stopped the curse from harming you. You are internally shielded."

Severus blinked, while Dumbledore's eyebrows rose.

"This protection blocked the Unforgivable? How is that possible?" Severus asked.

"I think the more important question to ask is how this protection got there," Albus stated.

O o O o O

Harry had not been too surprised when Madam Pomfrey told him soon after he woke that he was to go to Dumbledore's office to answer some questions. And so, entering the Headmaster's office, he felt ready for whatever the meeting entailed.

"Ah, Harry, good morning. Lemon Drop?" Dumbledore asked.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, taking the sweet and sitting in the offered chair.

"The others will be with us shortly," the Headmaster said.

Madam Pomfrey was currently with the Creeveys in the infirmary but would come as soon as she could, but Professors Snape and Sprout were already on their way.

Dennis' family had arrived when Harry was leaving the infirmary, escorted by Professor McGonagall. It was a scene that would remain with Harry forever. The looks on their faces . . . it was indescribable. Harry knew it would be a blessed reunion, especially now that they knew Dennis had already been cured of Lycanthropy.

"How are your lessons going with Professor Sprout?" Dumbledore asked, deciding not to begin the discussion concerning the previous night just yet.

"Very good, sir. The Modus Cube has been very helpful; thanks again for it. I don't overpower my spells as much anymore and Professor Sprout says my control has improved a lot," Harry answered, understandably proud. "I think I might begin the protective aspect of Parselmagic soon."

"I'm glad you're finding it helpful, and I'm sure you'll grasp Protection, just as you have Healing, soon enough," Dumbledore assured before moving on. "How about your time assisting Madam Pomfrey? She briefly mentioned you are trying different things but didn't say much beyond that."

"Well, a few people have asked me if I can remove scars, so I've decided to shift my attention there. I can make fresh scars fade and sometimes completely disappear, like ones that are only a week or so old, but ones that are older, which I've tried to heal. . . . It doesn't work." Harry shrugged, a little frustrated.

"Hmm, why do you think that is?" Dumbledore asked.

"I think it's because I actually dissolve the scar tissue and use it to help the surrounding healthy tissue to 'fill in' the void. However, for older scars, the flesh around the scar has 'set'. I'm not sure how else to describe it. Anyway, because of that, I can't heal old scars, because as soon as I begin breaking down the scar tissue, there's nothing to take its place, so I stop. I doubt people want a hole in place of their scar."

The Headmaster nodded in agreement. "I see how that can be a problem."

"Do you . . . do you have any ideas that could help?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore scratched his chin. "The problem seems to lie in the fact that the healthy flesh surrounding the old scar has 'set' and is not longer malleable, correct?"

"Malleable?" Harry asked, not completely sure of the word.

"Flexible or able to be shaped."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. It's as if the healthy tissue has set a new boundary of where it should exist."

"Well, my only suggestion would be to remove the 'border', although that would likely entail some rather . . . unpleasant work," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry was quiet for a moment, thinking it over.

:His idea does have promise: Coral said. :In a way, it would be like working on a new scar if you did that.:

:But I would be cutting good tissue: Harry argued, before processing it further and nodding. :However, I would be able to heal the damage I have to do, and numbing the area is no problem. So it would be like you said — healing a new scar, which is easy once I get to that point. I would need to warn the person I'm healing what I'll have to do though:

Dumbledore listened but said nothing, letting Harry think it through on his own. It was then that Severus and Pomona entered.

"Good morning, Headmaster, Mr. Potter," Snape said, giving them an acknowledging nod before Sprout wished them good morning as well. The professors politely refused the lemon drops Albus offered.

"And how are you, Harry? Do you still have a headache?" Professor Sprout asked once they had all gotten settled.

"It's not too bad now," Harry said with a shrug, not sure of how to react to her concern.

"If it gets to become too much, let us know," Sprout said seriously.

Harry nodded, glancing at Professor Snape and the Headmaster, who both obviously shared her sentiment.

"Well, Harry," the Headmaster began, his tone alone telling Harry mild chitchat was over. "Am I right in assuming you experienced a vision last night, like you had this summer?"

"Yes, sir," he said, glancing at Professor Snape while recalling what he had witnessed.

"Could you tell us what you saw?" Dumbledore asked.

"Sure," he said, not quite understanding why they wanted to know, but figuring there had to be a reason. Perhaps they were concerned about how he was feeling about it? "The first thing I saw was Dennis being moved into the circle. I think the vision started there because of how excited Voldemort was just then."

Dumbledore and Snape nodded, agreeing with Harry's assessment.

Harry then continued, telling them how angry Voldemort had become when Professor Snape killed Nagini and the two people by the ward. Professor Sprout looked particularly sad while hearing Harry retell that part — as she did not like that Harry had been forced to witness it. He, however, frankly wasn't all that upset about it. From Greyback, he had accepted the harsh reality that sometimes mercy couldn't always be practiced.

Of course, seeing such a thing done was not the same as personally carrying it out.

Harry wondered if he would have been able to do what Professor Snape had if he had been in that situation. It was not exactly a pleasant thing to ponder on, but it was unavoidable.

A sudden knock at the door interrupted Harry's thoughts, prompting the Headmaster to beckon Madam Pomfrey in.

"I apologize for being late, but I felt the Creeveys needed some reassurance before I gave them some privacy," she said, coming in.

"No problem at all, Poppy. I trust all is well?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes. Considering everything that boy has gone through, he is doing quite well, and now that his family is with him, I'm sure he'll be able to move past what's happened in time," Poppy said as she conjured a chair and took a seat. "Well now, what have I missed?"

Poppy of course knew what had happened at the ritual (she had been told the previous night), but didn't know the extent of its effect on Harry.

"Harry was telling us what he saw last night," Sprout supplied.

Dumbledore then gave a rough summation of Harry's dream thus far before giving him a nod to continue. With that, Harry went on and got to the part where Voldemort cast the powerful Cruciatus Curse on Professor Snape.

Harry understandably paused there, unable to stop himself from staring at the

Potions Master.

"Voldemort was actually afraid when the spell didn't seem to do anything, sir," Harry said finally.

"He was *afraid*?" Professor Sprout asked, astonished (although she was already quite stunned about the crucio maxima).

Harry nodded. "It's the only time I've ever felt complete fear from him."

"Severus' resistance to the curse no doubt unnerved Voldemort, which should be of no surprise," Dumbledore pointed out before focusing on Harry. "But I think we all want to understand what caused this mysterious defense. If it could be harnessed. . . ."

Harry blinked as Coral shifted around his wrist.

:Do you think . . .?: she hissed very quietly.

"Harry, Madam Pomfrey examined Professor Snape soon after we arrived from answering questions at the Ministry last night, and she found traces of your magical signature coating his nerves," Dumbledore explained. "Do you know how that came to be?"

Harry bit his bottom lip, suddenly recalling the conversation he had had with his favorite professor after discovering White Magic without informing anyone. He was afraid to even look at Professor Snape just then, certain he would see disappointment.

He couldn't believe he had made the mistake again!

"Harry?" Professor Sprout asked, noticing his nervousness.

:Might as well just tell them: Coral advised. :They probably already have a theory that's pretty close to the truth anyway:

"It was last year, on Halloween," Harry finally spoke.

Dumbledore and the other adults' eyes widened, putting a few pieces to the puzzle together.

"When I was treating the Professor," he said with glance toward Snape, "I found curse residue and a thin magical . . . membrane covering his nerves, although there were tears and some of the nerves had been exposed and damaged," Harry

explained. "I used my parselmagic to repair and strengthen the membrane."

"Extraordinary," Dumbledore whispered, thinking.

"The membrane was already there?" Snape asked, unable to keep all the surprise from his voice.

Harry frowned. "Yeah, shouldn't it have been?"

"No, Harry. From the cases I've studied from the Ministry, every patient they've extensively examined who has suffered from the Cruciatus has had nothing remotely like what you've described," Pomfrey explained.

"But what about the professor?" Harry asked, wondering why she hadn't discovered Snape's protection last year when he had come to the infirmary.

"The diagnostic charm I used last year wasn't powerful enough to detect it, and I had no reason to cast the more powerful spell," Pomfrey replied.

"Alright, but how did it get there in the first place?" Severus asked, wanting to move things along.

"If I'm not mistaken, it is due to how many times you have been exposed to the curse over the years," Dumbledore theorized solemnly.

"That would explain it," Pomfrey softly agreed.

"It does, but I am still astounded anything would be able to combat Voldemort's *crucio*, let alone one coupled with *maxima*," Sprout put in.

"It is rather astonishing," Dumbledore agreed.

"Um, sorry, but how much does a 'maxima' affect a spell?" Harry asked after a moment. "I mean, does it double the effects or what?"

Pomfrey and the other professors glanced at each other before looking to the Headmaster. How should they answer that? It was a valid question after all, and Harry, no matter how dark the truth, deserved to be told.

Dumbledore held back a sigh, knowing it was his responsibility to answer this question.

"Though I have reservations about informing you of this, I feel your question deserves a very precise answer . . . considering everything. I also admit this

information may be beneficial in other ways," he said softly, his steely blue eyes meeting Harry's green.

Harry nodded slowly, now wondering if he wanted to be answered.

"The Longbottoms," Dumbledore began, "You know, were subjected to the Unforgivable, but what you do not know is that their current conditions were not brought about exactly the same way."

Pomfrey opened her mouth, no doubt about to question the wisdom of discussing the Longbottoms, but then decided against it.

"Alice Longbottom was subjected to the curse multiple times by four individuals for nearly half an hour, nonstop." Dumbledore's voice was void of any emotion, but the pain of stating the truth was evident in his eyes. "Frank Longbottom, however, was not. He received a single 'Crucio Maxima', held for nearly fifteen seconds."

Harry tried to stifle the sudden lump that rose in his throat, recalling how frail Mr. Longbottom had appeared in the bed, essentially comatose, while his wife aimlessly wandered the room.

"Wh—" Words failed him at first, but Harry managed after a heavy swallow. "Why did they do this?"

Dumbledore's eyes grew dark. "Soon after Voldemort fell, a number of Death Eaters went searching for answers. These four, Bartemius Crouch Jr. and the Lestranges, believed the Longbottoms knew what had happened to their master because they were greatly involved in the war."

Harry's eyes grew wide and couldn't help but ask, "Did they know?"

"Yes — but they didn't reveal anything. We know this because the Wizengamot questioned one of the Lestranges under Veritaserum. Even at the very end of their strength, the Longbottoms refused to even utter a sliver of any of their knowledge."

Harry bit his lip, trying to comprehend the sacrifice the Longbottoms had made, and all for a secret that was no longer a secret — The cause of Voldemort's fall.

Him.

Releasing a shuddering breath, Harry felt Professor Sprout's hand come to rest on his shoulder.

"They had more secrets that needed to be kept than your part in Voldemort's fall, Harry," Dumbledore stated, correctly assuming where Harry's thoughts had headed. "Their unwavering defiance in the face of such cruel pain protected and saved many people, not just you. Don't allow ill-placed guilt mar their sacrifice."

Harry grew still, knowing the Headmaster was right. It hadn't been his fault, but it was hard not to think, 'if it hadn't been for me, maybe they would still be here for Neville.' But then, even without Dumbledore's words, he knew such a thought was frankly idiotic. If not for him (or what had happened with him) Voldemort may have still been around for the past ten or so years, killing and hurting countless others. Also, how could he allow himself to be distracted by pointless guilt? He should be focusing on what to do. He should be doing everything he could to honor their sacrifice. Everything he could do to prevent what had happened to the Longbottoms from ever occurring again.

Filled with a new sense of resolve, Harry nodded his head, agreeing with Dumbledore as Sprout gave his shoulder a supportive squeeze.

"So, what shall we do now?" Madam Pomfrey asked once the poignant moment had passed.

"If I know Mr. Potter at all, I believe he may know," Professor Snape stated, causing Harry to look up and lock eyes with him.

Harry bit his lip for a second before giving a small nod and pulling up his sleeve to expose Coral. Dumbledore and the others looked on expectantly as Professor Snape stood held out his hand for Harry to take.

With Coral around his wrist, Harry's hand clasped Snape's and his parselmagic responded to his intent.

Harry stretched out his magic, images instantly coming to his mind's eye.

The membrane of protective magic blanketed the Professor's nerves and pockets of black curse residue lay scattered. The color of the residue caught Harry's attention, making him recall the residue he had seen the previous year had not been nearly as dark or dense, but his attention was quickly drawn elsewhere.

The layer of protection was barely damaged, bearing faint cracks here and there, but this was not the most astonishing thing. It was repairing itself. Slowly, extremely slowly, the defensive film was recovering.

It was remarkable.

"Harry?" Professor Sprout asked, making him pull back and blink up at the Potion Master's face.

"It's repairing itself," Harry managed.

"How much damage is there?" Pomfrey asked, her eyes widening at his words.

"Not a whole lot, but then, it's had a bit of time to recover," Harry answered.

"Albus, if this could be harnessed and, I don't know, turned into a vaccine of sorts . . ." Pomfrey said after collecting herself. This was huge, after all.

"Unfortunately, I honestly doubt this can be as easily bottled and distributed as White Magic," Severus stated. "However, there may be another way. Muggles can take living tissue from one individual and place it in another."

"Organ transplants," Pomfrey said with a nod, though a little unnerved by the seemingly random reference.

"Where are you going with this, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, confused but intrigued.

"I think 'transplanting' this membrane would be possible and could be comparable to bone marrow transplants in the muggle world."

Pomfrey and Harry slowly nodded, following Severus a bit more than Albus and Pomona were due to the research they had been doing to improve Harry's parselmagic and overall medical knowledge.

"Bone marrow transplants?" Dumbledore asked. He knew what bone marrow was, but had no idea what was unique to that sort of transplant.

"To put it simply, for a patient who needs healthy bone marrow (usually after undergoing an intense type of therapy), a healer or doctor will remove some healthy marrow from a donor and transplant it into the patient, whose body will move it into their bones where it will then promote and facilitate healthy growth of blood cells once again," Severus explained.

"Severus, I'm trying to follow you, but this is a bit beyond me," Pomona said apologetically.

"Forgive me. What I am saying is that I believe this membrane could be 'transplanted' and the result would be similar to how a bone marrow transplant

works, as in, only a small donation would be needed for a 'patient' to eventually obtain the protection on their own."

"Because the transplanted membrane would 'take hold' and enable the patient's own body to finish constructing it?" Dumbledore asked.

Severus nodded. "Granted, this is just what I think."

"It certainly sounds possible," Pomfrey agreed as the others nodded in at least mild agreement.

"Mr. Potter, do you think you could copy this membrane and apply it to someone else, say . . . yourself?" Snape asked after a moment.

"I think so, Professor," Harry said.

"Severus, I'm not so sure that's a good idea. We've only just learned about its existence. What if it's unique to you because of your experiences?" Sprout questioned. "We have no idea of its full capabilities or if it would have any negative side effects if Harry placed it in himself, let alone anyone else."

"But it has some of my magic in it, professor," Harry softly argued.

"Yes, but tailored specifically to repair and strengthen Professor Snape's existing protection," Sprout said.

"I honestly see no reason why Mr. Potter could not tailor it to himself," Severus replied. "However, perhaps your caution is wise, though I do not think we should put off taking advantage of this."

"I'm simply saying we should not rush into anything," Sprout said gently.

"With the Dark Lord, we may not have the luxury of time. We must develop every advantage we have at our disposal as quickly and as best we can."

Dumbledore gave a thoughtful hum. "I agree . . . with Severus."

Harry, who had been looking back and forth between Snape and Sprout as they politely argued, glanced down at Coral, hoping for some advice.

:I'm in agreement with Professor Snape and the Headmaster: Coral said quietly.
:Can never be too prepared:

Harry nodded, not about to refute that logic as Pomfrey and the others turned their

attention back to him.

"I'd like to try," Harry said, mentally noting it was Sunday, so today may be the best time to attempt to apply the protection.

"Very well then, Harry. If Madam Pomfrey okay's it, you may try — here, if that's agreeable?" Dumbledore said, glancing at the mediwitch, though he spared a look at Sprout as well, who gave an accepting nod.

"I have no arguments, especially as the Creeveys are occupying the infirmary at the moment," Pomfrey said, standing up and transfiguring her chair into a recliner. "I have no problem monitoring him here and, I assume, now?"

Dumbledore gave a nod and stood as well.

Harry got up from his chair, which Sprout promptly vanished, and went to the simple recliner between Pomfrey and Snape. Dumbledore waved his wand and moved his desk back so Harry would have a bit more space, which was appreciated.

"Whenever you're ready, Harry," Dumbledore said, standing beside his desk as Sprout moved to the other side.

"Alright," Harry said, looking at Snape as Coral lifted her head up. "It should just take a moment for me to copy it from you and go from there, professor."

Severus nodded in understanding and once again held out his hand, which Harry took.

"I think I'll focus placing the membrane only over my left hand's nerves for now," Harry said. "Just in case."

"I was just about to suggest that," Pomfrey said with a smile as Harry set to work.

Harry soon got what he needed from Severus and quickly laid back, muttering parseltongue under his breath as Coral flicked her tongue over his wrist, magic coursing through her.

It was a little strange to use parselmagic on himself, as the majority of the time he only used it on others, but he felt confident in his abilities.

Taking what he had copied from Snape as a template, he focused on converting a bit of his magic into it and allowing it to trickle out and coat his nerves like a skin. He started at his palm, hoping the membrane would spread out and go to the tips of his

fingers and to his wrist. It was hard work, and preventing the raw magic forming the membrane from shifting about was especially difficult. Despite that though, it was going well, or at least until he felt an odd tremor pulse out from his hand and to his entire frame.

:Harry!: Coral cried.

And that was the last thing Harry heard before he knew . . . something was about to go horrifyingly awry.

Time seemed to freeze as words said by Professor Snape nearly a year before echoed in his mind.

'Things can *go wrong. . . .'*

The words seemed to reverberate for a long moment before there was an obscure twist of something entirely insubstantial but unrelenting. His hand suddenly felt as if it was getting run over by a fat lead roller before the weight stretched out, encompassing his whole being, choking him. He felt unimaginable pressure squeezing him from all around, ten times worse than apparition and much more disorienting than traveling by portkey.

He couldn't breathe; it felt as if there was a massive cinderblock on his chest with his whale of a cousin sitting on top of it. He tried shoving the weight off with his arms, but it was no use, his arms refused to work together and he was certain they just flailed about.

He tried pushing out with his magic, to stop the unbearable crushing sensation, but it was as effective as using a finger to push open a vault door.

He blacked out.

O o O o O

They immediately knew something was wrong when Coral suddenly began hissing hysterically and Harry stiffened, his face scrunching up in what they could only assume was pain.

Severus' eyes shot to Pomfrey, who immediately began waving her wand over him.

"What's happening, Poppy? !" Sprout cried as Harry suddenly appeared to be struggling to breathe.

"I-I don't know, but the protection he had managed to make has collapsed."

Sprout gasped, her eyes widening in horrified understanding. "Like a castle . . ." she breathed.

"What?" Albus asked.

"He once told me the protective aspect of Parselmagic is like building a castle. He had said, 'If you build the walls wrong, it could fall in on you. You have to place the stones correctly'," she answered.

Severus muttered a curse, recalling what he had read in 'The Art of Parsel' and concluding Sprout was right.

"But this isn't . . ." Pomfrey began, about to argue that what Harry was trying to do was 'Healing' not 'Protection', but then suddenly realized. . . .

How could they have been so dumb?

However, before she could go off on an internal rant, Harry shot up, his eyes snapping open as he heaved in several breaths of air and groped for something to grab onto, Coral still around his wrist.

Sprout hurried forward, patting his back and helping him keep his balance. "Easy there, Harry, just focus on breathing."

:Coral?: he managed, feeling her tighten around his wrist.

:You were moving the magic too fast. The protection collapsed: Coral stated. :I'm sorry. I realized it too late:

:I felt like I was being smashed: he stated, now relying on Sprout to keep him upright.

:How do you feel now?:

:Sore and tired, but okay, I think:

:Might want to let the professors know then: Coral advised.

With that, Harry opened his eyes and looked up at the professors, who had edged closer around him, but not so much to actually crowd him.

"I'm alright. I just tried it too fast," Harry managed.

"I think there's more to it than that, Harry," Pomfrey said, lowering her wand when she found no permanent damage.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, his breathing now under control.

"I think you've just attempted Protective Parselmagic."

Harry's eyes widened at that as Coral blinked.

:You know, Harry, I think she might be right:

O o O o O

Next part, *Loss*, is under construction.

A/N: Sorry it took a bit more time than usual to get this part out. I admit I had some serious-serious trouble writing the office scene, but fortunately it managed to come together . . . eventually.

Thanks again for all the reviews! They really help ^^

Also, thanks for letting me know ff-net was messing up and not showing this part.

Loss

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Severus' Dark Mark **—** Though I'm sure Voldemort would enjoy torturing Severus through the mark, he has more important things to do than 'summon' Snape to cause his dark mark to burn. Not only that, but in canon I don't think it ever really specified if Voldemort could be that selective in choosing whose dark mark to activate long distance.

Severus' Protection against Crucio **—** His continued exposure to the curse caused his body to seek a way to minimize the damage caused by it (like callouses), but this was only made possible by his complete willingness to undergo the torture in hopes of protecting/saving others - hence, Sacrificial Magic.

Future Harry having Parselmagic — Yes, he used it, but not as broadly as present-Harry, as he did not have many opportunities to experiment with it due to basic survival being priority.

Is Severus a unique type of wizard? **—** I honestly haven't really decided, but I'm going to say no. However, he is definitely a powerful wizard, and one who has taken his magic beyond what most would deem possible for an 'average wizard' through necessity.

Deathly Hallows — To keep things from getting overly complicated, they don't exist in this story.

Voldemort's Diary — For the purpose of this story, the Diary was a dark item the Dark Lord created. Think of it as a wizard's portrait, but much stronger, preserving his personality for all time in hopes of perhaps guiding/manipulating those who find it.

Part 29: Loss

The weeks went by painfully for Severus. He had never really been one for glory; though, there had been a few times in his life where he strongly desired to be recognized and rewarded, he had come to realize the spot light was not for him. In fact, he despised it.

Colin Creevey was in awe of him, and many of the other first years were as well. Actually, most of the student population was — annoyingly so.

And the Press. . . . He refused to think on it.

The only slightly positive thing was how attentive the students were now in Potions, but that provided little solace.

The staff was no help, if anything, they encouraged the hero worship.

Severus suddenly had a very good idea how Harry felt and could only hope the attention would dwindle and pass away quickly. It didn't.

"Really, Severus, I don't know why you are so surprised by all of this," Filius said.

They were walking down a corridor late at night. One of the few times Severus could have a respite.

"I thought it would have gone away by now. It's nearly Christmas for Merlin's sake," Severus grumbled.

"You really are oblivious, aren't you? Not only did you prevent the deaths of those children, you've done something no one else has ever done before. You tricked the Dark Lord to a previously unfathomable degree, and got away with it," Filius said, his voice slowing at the end, as if he himself could scarcely believe it.

"Hmph, gotten away with it? You can be sure the Dark Lord is planning his revenge this very moment."

"You don't seem too bothered by it, and perhaps that is another reason why so many are . . . impressed by you. Also, let's not forget that you'll be receiving the Order of Merlin soon."

Severus didn't say anything in response to that; instead, his thoughts went elsewhere, seeking a distraction. Filius let him be before bidding him good night and turning off onto a side hall.

Severus knew Voldemort was, as he had told Filius, planning his revenge. He also knew, thanks to Harry's accursed scar, that Voldemort was stewing and, if Harry's interpretation was anywhere near correct, growing truly desperate.

This did little to comfort Severus, as he knew how much more dangerous the monster was when he was backed into a corner. He would do something soon. He had been too quiet these past few months not to make a move.

O o O o O

Harry could hardly believe how quickly the months had passed, though he had been pretty busy. His days had been occupied by classes, his research, and understanding and using the protective aspect of parselmagic.

Placing the protection on himself was slow going, but thanks to Mr. Lee he had made more progress than he had expected to. After writing to Mr. Lee about his problem and asking if he had any books on the subject or knew any parselmouths in his area of the world, Mr. Lee pulled in a few favors and was able to send him some old notes handwritten by a deceased parselmouth. It had taken Lee some time to do this, of course, but Harry had the old documents before the middle of November.

There were about forty sheets of parchment, covered front to back with squiggles. Of course, Harry didn't see this. He saw perfectly written English. A bit slanted and awkward in some places, but still discernible. Draco and the others, however, stared at the illegible mess in confusion.

"Uh, Harry, can you read that?" Neville asked.

"Of course, and it's already answered something I've been wondering about! This is going to help, loads. I can already tell," Harry answered, not looking up from the page as Greg and Vince glanced at each other. Draco and Neville blinked.

"It must be written in parseltongue," Draco reasoned.

Harry looked up at that. "Well, I suppose that explains why I can read it, considering it was written about a hundred years ago by someone who lived in India," he said after a thoughtful pause.

And so Harry continued to read, study, and work. He was hopeful he would complete the protection on himself before the holidays, especially after discovering the essential part of all protections — what the notes called an 'anchor'. In this instance, the anchor was his body's magical network, which was made up by his core and ran through his skeletal frame, rooted in his bone marrow. The book Madam Pomfrey had taken him through months before, 'Inner Core and Network,' went hand in hand with this and had provided the means for him to begin making some real headway.

Besides his progress in parselmagic, Harry had also managed to, through Dumbledore, make contact with Dr. Price. After being told about the Longbottoms' condition, he agreed to examining them if their current 'caretaker' agreed. Neville was ecstatic and eagerly wrote to his Gran about allowing Price to examine his parents.

Augusta was not as open to the idea as Neville and Harry would have liked, but she

had not totally blown off the suggestion. Harry suspected it was due to Dumbledore's intervention. However, despite the initial set back, Neville finally got her to cave after weeks of begging; no doubt his words of 'we owe it to them to try' reached her. Thus, sometime during the winter holidays, the Longbottoms would pay a visit to Dr. Price.

Harry continued his correspondence with Sirius, and though things had not started out as one may have liked, things were relaxing now and Sirius was beginning to really feel like an uncle to Harry instead of a stranger who happened to have known his parents. The other thing that had changed was Sirius' employment status. He was now a tutor, teaching citizens who wanted to better defend themselves. Being known as a former Auror, he was not low on customers and it was easy work, at least to him.

This was all well and good, and Harry was happy for him, but it now brought up the issue of Sirius' role as his godfather — specifically, where his guardianship was concerned. The Healers had given him a clean bill of health, both in mind and body. Sirius was fit to care for him, and apparently had secured a nice big house along with his solid job.

Though Sirius had yet to mention guardianship to him, Harry wasn't dumb. It was obvious the man was preparing the means to properly provide for him, and if things had been different. . . .

But they weren't.

It made Harry's insides churn painfully at the thought of having to make a decision — assuming he was still given a choice.

It just wasn't fair, and so, Harry decided to put it from his mind for now, even though in his heart he had already made his decision.

Things school wise went on as they had been before, for the most part at least. Colin Creevey was the only noticeable change (or addition to the usual chaos surrounding Harry's education — attention wise). The camera armed boy became a common shadow, but knowing what had almost happened to his little brother, Harry endured it, especially after seeing the hero worship the boy bestowed upon Professor Snape. Better the Professor than him, Harry decided. He could deal with being followed occasionally.

The past months were not all cheerful and harmless, however. Off and on, Harry was plagued with odd flashing nightmares and scar pains. Though, fortunately, the 'moat' Nicholas had set up in his mind helped muffle it all, and the fact he was doing rudimentary occlumency (basic calming exercises) helped as well. What did manage

to come through didn't make any sense and he soon forced himself to ignore it all, as trying to discern any of it only gave him a headache and distracted him from making progress in things he could control. However, the little he had been able to pull from the connection were emotions of fear, frustration, and desperation.

And frankly, he was fine with that. If he had to feel anything from Voldemort, he preferred those emotions over glee, excitement, and accomplishment.

O o O o O

Draco was honestly not looking forward to the coming holidays. He liked the security of Hogwarts, and even though he knew the Dark Lord had been injured, it did little to comfort him. He just couldn't help but worry about what may happen to his family if Voldemort decided to pay them a visit, especially after his godfather had betrayed him. . . .

By the letters from his father, it didn't sound like the Dark Lord had made much contact, but from his father's wording, he got the feeling his parents were just waiting for it. Draco wondered if they would carry out the plan he had spoken to Sev about then. Would they leave England? Would he ever see Hogwarts again? His friends? And what about Vince and Greg? In a way, their families were in the same position as his was. Did they have a plan to escape if it became necessary? If the worst were to happen (whatever that was), would they have a chance?

He shook himself. He couldn't let himself think like that. And as loath as he was to admit it, he wasn't an adult, and should he try to ask Greg and Vince if they had a plan, it very well might undermine any plans their parents may have already made. After all, such plans were best kept secret, and encouraging them to look into what their families' arrangements entailed would be detrimental and dangerous. Even Draco himself did not know exactly what his parents and godfather had set up, only that a plan existed, and he knew that was for the best.

And so, Draco found himself hoping his friends' parents had some contingency plans like his family did.

O o O o O

The winter holidays finally arrived and for many students the break was long overdue.

"So what are your plans?" Draco asked them on their way to King's Cross Station.

In the compartment, there was Harry, Neville, Draco, Vincent, and Gregory. They

had already purchased a bit of candy and were about to open another round of chocolate frogs.

"Gran is going to meet with Dr. Price this week and she's already scheduled an appointment for my parents with him," he answered, utterly bubbly. There was no other word for it.

"Happy for you, mate," Greg said as the others added their own congratulations.

"I'm so glad Gran listened. You know, at first, I thought she would never agree."

"Why wouldn't she though? I mean, sure, they're *muggle* Healers, but isn't it worth giving them a shot?" Vince asked.

"I honestly don't blame her," Draco defended. "I would have been doubtful too. After all, how many times have Healers promised a certain treatment would help, only for it to fail?"

Neville grew solemn. "Many times."

"I think Dr. Price will be able to help," Harry said, not wanting Neville to get depressed. "I mean, he'll at least be able to get a closer look at the problem, and that'll be more than the Healers have been able to do."

Neville nodded, hope returning.

"So, ready for that award ceremony, Order of Merlin Recipient?" Draco teased.

Harry sighed. "It's not like I really have a choice whether I am or not. I doubt they're going to let me miss it."

"Well, at least Professor Snape will be getting it too," Neville said.

"You think he'll let me hide behind him?" Harry asked jokingly (for the most part).

The others laughed.

:I don't think it'll be all that bad, Harry. I bet there will be cake and stuff: Coral said, before adding happily, :They'll probably even have some mice for me:

:No doubt: Harry deadpanned as King's Cross came into view.

O o O o O

Severus wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed that the break had finally arrived.

Opening his closet, he looked at his formal robes, glaring at them in contempt — as if it was their fault he would be going to the Ministry later that break to receive his Order of Merlin.

It was strange. In the original timeline, he would have given anything to receive such an honor, but now it seemed like such a waste of time for some reason. Of course, it wasn't as if he thought what he had done for the werewolves was pointless, or that his work in general was not something he should take pride in, it was just . . . after so much time of having gone unappreciated (at least where the general public was concerned), finally receiving recognition felt so unimportant to him.

Perhaps it was having experienced what he had in the future, when the desire for praise went by the wayside and survival became paramount.

He shook his head. Well, at least he would not be the only one receiving the Order of Merlin, and he couldn't help but feel it fitting that he would be sharing the honor with Harry.

He closed the closet door and went to his living room chamber, wondering how this break would go for the boy. Severus was certain Harry would enjoy Christmas with the Flamels, but he was honestly a little concerned about Black.

According to Albus, the Healers had cleared Black, and the Ministry's Child Welfare Service had approved his request to apply for Harry's guardianship. The Headmaster had tried to convince Black patience was needed in this instance, not to mention a bit more consideration for Harry's feelings, but the man hadn't listened. When did he ever?

Frankly, things were moving a bit too fast for Severus' liking, but there was nothing he could do about it. He only hoped Black's initiative wouldn't cause any setbacks for Harry. The last thing he needed was Black drama on top of everything else. Things usually went south pretty quickly when such, well, stupid impulsiveness took place.

Severus sat down, allowing his mind to wander to his former future. . . .

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Things had just begun to get serious, and in a deadly sort of way. The summer break before Harry's sixth year had nearly ended, and the Ministry had finally realized Voldemort and his followers were not going to simply disappear if they ignored them.

To make things even more interesting, Black was being difficult.

*"Why does **he** have to teach him?" Black asked Dumbledore.*

They were at Headquarters, and most of the upper ring of the Order were present — Mad-Eye, Remus, Arthur, himself, and of course Black and Dumbledore.

"I feel it prudent Harry be taught how Death Eaters fight by someone who has the most experience in such things," Dumbledore calmly answered.

*"We've all fought them and have been fighting them for years — a few of us here for even longer than him. **I** could teach Harry, no doubt even better."*

"No, Severus must teach him."

"Well, if Severus' instruction is so great, why not have him give all of us a lesson?" Black argued sarcastically.

"That could be arranged, I suppose, but I doubt it would do any good," Severus cut in.

"Oh, and why is that?"

"It would be like trying to teach an old, deaf, and blind dog new tricks."

"Severus," Dumbledore warned, simply to prevent curses from being exchanged.

"That still doesn't answer my question of why someone else can't teach my godson," Black said furiously, barely keeping control of himself as Dumbledore gave him the 'don't-do-anything-foolish' look.

"You all, save the Headmaster, fight like Aurors," Severus stated simply.

"So? What's wrong with that?" Black asked defensively.

"Potter not only needs to know how to defend himself, but win. Being taught to fight like an Auror will not do that."

Mad-Eye grunted.

"Aurors have defeated plenty of Death Eaters!" Black shouted.

"But not permanently."

"Dumbledore, you mean to have Snivellus turn my godson into a MURDERER?" Black roared.

"Black, you're an idiot," Severus said lazily as Black turned toward him and moved to charge.

Fortunately (or unfortunately in Snape's opinion), he was restrained by Remus.

"Gentlemen, please!" Dumbledore stated, now losing a bit of his famous patience. "Sirius, I trust Severus to instruct Harry in all he needs to fight and survive, and while we all wish it was not necessary, it is. Should the worst happen, Harry must be able to hold his own again any opponent, even Voldemort. He cannot do that with conventional methods."

"Then why don't you teach him?" Black shot back. "You're the only one here who has a chance against Voldemort!"

"Unfortunately, I don't have the time to teach him my style of fighting. I had nearly a decade to fine-tune it before I needed to use it in real combat. Harry does not have that time."

"So you're just going to hand him over to the Death Eater to learn how to throw AK's around?" Black asked incredulously.

"I sincerely doubt Potter is capable of such magic," Severus sneered — though his tone was more to annoy Black than to express any negative attitude about Harry.

By now, Severus had begun to realize his feud with James Potter was better left as dead as the man. There were more important things to focus on.

"Would you stop baiting him?" Remus asked, surprisingly cutting in before Dumbledore could.

"I was merely stating a fact. Potter's strength is not in brute force, as his style in Quidditch can attest to, but in something you, Black, completely lack."

"Severus. . ." Dumbledore chided, even as the potions master continued.

"Finesse. Now, that's not to say the boy doesn't have moments of supreme stupidity, but I can teach him to deny the genetic impulse."

"And do what instead?" Black asked, still restrained by Remus.

"Think as he fights. To get in the head of his opponent, to read his opponent, to bring them exactly where he wants them to enable his escape or his victory."

"You've given this a lot of thought," Arthur stated, speaking up for the first time.

"I take this task very seriously, no matter anyone's misgivings regarding my appointment. I will not allow myself to fail in it."

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Severus closed his eyes, his past words echoing in his ears, his vow still permeating with his reason for living. He sighed, recalling what had happened later that same year — when everything began to deteriorate. . . .

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The Ministry had decided to run a 'morale boosting' campaign in which they held a Christmas party in the Atrium. Of course, Harry, Dumbledore, and many others were invited, and due to some annoying coercion (such as public pressure) and the fact many people wanted to experience something positive for a change, the Ministry got their wish.

Unfortunately, it was exactly the sort of gathering the Dark Lord had been waiting for, and even worse, Voldemort had waited until the hour of the event to share his plan with his Death Eaters — far too late for Severus to send any kind of warning.

In mere moments, the Atrium was under siege and death was heavy in the air. The Minister was killed by Bellatrix within the first few seconds and over half the party guests fell to a plethora of curses from other Death Eaters soon after. But that was only the beginning.

Voldemort set his eyes on Harry as Dumbledore called for Order reinforcements through Fawkes — a move more to assist in evacuating survivors than turning the

tide of the battle.

Harry wisely began using his training, but a few months of instruction, no matter how intense, had nothing on the years of real combat experience his opponents had. However, he made up for it in desperation and, what Severus called, 'finesse'.

Along with grasping the mental side of combat, Severus wanted Harry to be erratic and completely unpredictable in his movements because, according to Snape, Harry's inexperience was a 'horrible handicap' that could only be countered by a 'spontaneous style of combat'.

Harry had personally felt like a ballerina during those lessons, but after weeks of coping with Severus' merciless training, he came to accept that it was better to resemble a high tiptoeing lunatic than be dead.

Thus, due to this training, it didn't take long for Harry to be the only non-Death Eater still standing in his immediate vicinity.

"Ah, quick on your feet, I see," Voldemort said as Harry dodged two spells and blocked a third.

"Yeah, so?" Harry shouted in reply to be heard over the chaos.

"You fight like a frightened squirrel, Harry Potter," Voldemort stated, moving forward as the nearby Death Eaters focused on playing with lingering survivors.

Dumbledore was across the Atrium, keeping the last fireplace that was still in working order open. Finally, Order members began pouring through it and focused on reaching those still alive while defending their only escape route.

Harry was on his own.

"And you fight like an old man, Tom Riddle," Harry stated.

Voldemort gave a laugh that sounded more like a bark, but it was clear that he was annoyed.

"Ever the bold Gryffindor?"

"Ever the Dark Lord afraid of death?"

Voldemort replied with a dark curse.

Harry dived behind a fallen table and rolled back to his feet, wand raised.

Severus could only watch their exchange from a distance as he covertly brought down less experienced and less observant Death Eaters around him as he played his part of horrible Death Eater. He found himself praying Harry had enough 'finesse' to stay alive for Dumbledore to get to him.

Unfortunately, Dumbledore was still occupied, as Voldemort had tasked over a dozen Death Eaters to focus on the Headmaster, and though it wouldn't work for long, it would be long enough.

"Harry!"

Severus turned and was dismayed by the appearance of Sirius Black, practically bulldozing his way to his godson. The potions master had to give it to Black, he was certainly devoted.

But stupid.

Harry whipped around, but wisely did not completely show his back to the Dark Lord as Black continued forward, taking out adjacent Death Eaters, undaunted.

Severus saw it before it happened, and he instinctively knew one of the Gryffindors was likely about to die, for a perfect line could be drawn with Voldemort on one end, Black at the other, and Harry in the center.

With Severus' training, Harry noticed it as well, but a moment too late.

*With a triumphant smirk, Voldemort roared, "Avada Kedavra!" just as Harry rolled aside and cried, "Sirius, **move**!"*

Sirius Black did move, but not in a good way.

He fell back, struck in the chest by the bolt of green.

Despite the horribleness of the moment, Severus couldn't help but feel a surge of pride as Harry reacted.

Far from caving into shock or despair, Harry immediately attacked with a ferocity and a steadiness that was frankly a marvel to behold. Although Voldemort parried and blocked each one of his curses, it was clear in the Dark Lord's expression and posture that Harry had just earned some of his respect.

"Sorry about your godfather, Harry. He was your godfather, right?" Voldemort taunted as Harry continued to unleash his anger. "I was aiming for you, not him."

"Riddle!"

The voice could have cut through stone, but it did something even more impressive.

Voldemort visibly started, turning his attention to the only man he ever feared while unintentionally allowing a single spell of Harry's to strike him in the arm.

It was a glancing blow, but the fact anyone had been able to land any sort of blow on his person was apparently quite traumatizing for Tom Riddle.

With a sliced, bloody sleeve, Voldemort unleashed a torrent of Fiendfyre as Dumbledore summoned Harry away with a powerful yank of magic, leaving the area around Voldemort to the mercy of the flames. . . .

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Severus sighed, knowing he would never forget the anguish on Harry's face that day, as he forced himself to think about something else.

O o O o O

Neville was out of his comfort zone, not that that was anything really new, but being in a muggle hospital certainly was.

His parents had just been taken by 'Doctor' Price for their MRIs and examinations, leaving his grandmother and himself alone in the waiting room.

He glanced over at Gran who was staring at the far wall. She seemed to be doing well enough, but he figured that had as much to do with Dumbledore being so open about his own experience with Dr. Price as her own personal strength.

Suddenly, the door opened and in stepped Albus Dumbledore, closely followed by Harry.

"I apologize for being late, Augusta," Dumbledore said as Harry joined Neville, who was a few chairs over from his Gran.

"Quite alright. We've just been waiting anyway," she said.

While they continued to talk, Neville turned to Harry.

"Thanks for coming, Harry. I'm glad your caretakers let you," he began.

"No problem, Neville, and actually, I'm sort of glad to be out," he admitted.

Neville frowned, concerned for his friend. "Need some space from your caretakers?"

Harry blinked, before realizing how his statement had sounded. "No, nothing like that. We're getting along fine, it's just that . . . well, the Ministry's adoption board has been called, and soon a permanent guardian will be chosen for me. My caretakers have applied, of course, but so have a few others. . . ."

"And you don't want to leave those you're with now," Neville correctly concluded.

"Yeah, I want to stay with them, but you see, one of the other people who has applied is my godfather."

Neville's eyes widened. "Yeah, I can see how that complicates things."

"It gets a bit worse. My godfather is the one who is moving all of this along. My caretakers expect the board to have decided by the end of this week because of how hard he's pushing."

"Dang, that doesn't give the board much time to really look over things and stuff, does it?"

"No, but I've sent them a letter through Dumbledore, because they look at what the 'adoptee' wants too, fortunately."

"So you told them what you want," Neville said, approvingly.

"Yeah."

"What's the real problem?" Neville asked after a moment.

"Sirius. He didn't even write to me about wanting to adopt me before starting all of this. And though I suppose I could write him now and ask him about it, I don't know what to say. I feel like I should have learned he had applied through him, not Ni—my caretakers," Harry said, correcting himself at the end.

Neville understood the need for secrecy, though he couldn't help but be curious. He hoped he would learn who these people were who Harry had grown so attached to soon.

"Well, I'm sure he meant well. Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise?" Neville

suggested gently.

"It's not a very good one," Harry mumbled.

"I agree, but sometimes adults can be stupid."

Harry nodded. "Coral agrees with you."

Neville beamed. "Then I must be right!"

Harry smirked, feeling better.

"So, how is your Gran taking things?" Harry asked, changing the topic as he glanced over to where Dumbledore was quietly speaking with Augusta.

"I can't really tell, to be honest. She's been very quiet, but I think she's alright. I just hope Dr. Price has good news."

Harry nodded, privately recalling the things he had seen when he had examined Alice Longbottom. He hoped they would be able to do something for them.

A few minutes later, the side door opened and Dr. Price stepped out. After introducing Harry to him, he led them to his office. Augusta had agreed to have Harry and Dumbledore there for the discussion, which was no surprise as Harry would be working alongside Dr. Price to hopefully help the Longbottoms.

After getting settled, Dr. Price sat behind his desk and pulled out a folder.

"I've examined their blood work, MRIs, and overall examinations. There are some treatments we can try but let me explain my findings before discussing our options," Price said, his voice calm and reassuring. He glanced at Harry, no doubt still finding it difficult to believe a boy would be of much help, but he was open minded. He sort of had to be in his line of work.

"Their blood tests have come back relatively normal. There are some hormonal imbalances, but that is to be expected, considering the trauma, and we can correct that through medication," he said, opening the folder. "As for the trauma itself, we chose to do a full body scan in our MRI, as it shows tissues more clearly than the CT scanner." He took out a stack of images and laid them out on the desk in front of them before looking to Harry. "I understand you receive mental images of people you examine?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, his eyes glancing down at the MRI images.

He easily recognized the images, and he could already see where clusters of scar tissue were.

"I hope by combining our . . . resources, we will better understand their condition and what we can do to help them," Price said, before pointing to the first image, which was of Alice's spinal cord.

For over thirty minutes, Price outlined what he was able to determine, which wasn't all that good, but at least they had a better view of the problems.

Of the issues, both Alice and Frank had extensive nerve damage over their entire bodies, which was no surprise, and clusters of scar tissue within their brains, Frank more so than Alice.

"What can we do?" Augusta asked, her voice devoid of emotion. Harry decided she was choosing to go all 'business-like' to fight back her emotions.

"Taking care of brain scar tissue is the priority. As long as scar tissue is present there, their recovery will be seriously hampered. Now, we could go in surgically to physically remove several of the pockets. We wouldn't be able to remove them all, due to location of course, but I believe we could remove enough to possibly enable noticeable improvement. As it is now, the scar tissue is preventing nerve communication," Price explained.

"So physically removing them through surgery is the only option you know of?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, but there is also an experimental method we can use alongside it. It involves nanotechnology. After we remove the scar tissue, we also cut into the healthy tissue just beyond it and inject a fluid that encourages connection growth. The treatment is still extremely new and in the trial stage, but it looks very promising."

"If we chose to do that, how long would it take to see an improvement?" Augusta asked.

"It depends on how quickly healing takes place and whether or not there are complications, but if all goes well, I would say a month or so," Price speculated.

"What if I helped the healing along?" Harry asked.

Price slowly nodded. "That could help speed things along," he said, glancing at Albus. "Mr. Dumbledore told me you had helped him a bit. With the bruising, I believe it was you told him?"

"Yeah. I could see where you had gone in, and where you had cut and removed the bone fragments. So I took care of the swelling the surgery caused."

"Hmm, do you think you could do anything about scar tissue?" Price asked pensively.

"Well, in the Professor, I think so, but in the Longbottoms. . . ." He trailed off, glancing at Neville. "I guess it depends on whether or not they're 'curse scars' or not."

"Curse scars?"

"For some reason, I can't dissolve them like I can normal scars. I think the residue from the curse or something gets in the way. Maybe. I honestly don't know why," Harry admitted.

"Is there a way for you to tell if a scar is a cursed one or not?"

"I suppose I could just try dissolving it, but doing that to scar tissue in a brain doesn't seem like a good idea, sir."

"We would take the necessary precautions, assuming Madam Longbottom agreed," Price said, looking to Augusta who gave a nod of consent. "And we would have you only dissolve a few pockets at a time, especially as I have no idea how their bodies would react to it. What happens to the dissolved scar tissue in those you've treated?"

"Well, if it's a relatively 'fresh' scar, I can use it to help heal the nearby tissue and fill in the bit the scar had taken up, but for older ones, it just fades into nothing."

"Leaving a void? It just disappears?"

Harry nodded.

Price frowned. "That could complicate things if the internal pressure is affected . . . however, that could be handled with a shunt," Price mused to himself. "Assuming the scarring is dissolvable."

"Doctor," Augusta inquired. "A 'shunt'?"

"A drainage tube. Normally, it helps prevent the buildup of pressure in the brain by allowing fluid to exit. In this case, however, we would need to allow fluid to go in. I believe I could do the alterations without an issue."

"Very well. When can you begin?" she asked.

Price blinked. "Well, today if you wish. Though I would normally discuss treatment options with my peers, I doubt they would take 'curse scars' into consideration — being muggles not privy to the existence of magic and such."

"Thank you, doctor," Augusta said. "My son and his wife have waited long enough."

Price slowly nodded before looking to Harry. "Are you up to trying this today, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir. It's why I'm here. If I can help, I'd like to," he said.

"Alright. I'll begin getting things ready, though it'll take a few hours."

With that, they stood up, and Price led them to a room where Neville's parents were being cared for.

O o O

That afternoon, with IV's, monitor wires, and slightly altered shunts in place, Alice and Frank lay unconscious in an operating room, prepped and ready for what was hoped to be the beginning of their recovery.

Dumbledore and Neville were in the waiting room, while Augusta had insisted on being present during the procedure. Considering the situation, Price allowed it, but asked her to remain at the far wall, out of the way. There was only so much room, after all, and if something happened, he and the other professionals present would need to be able to move unhindered. For this reason also, Harry was given explicate instructions to move aside if Dr. Price said so.

Needing to keep the place 'sterile', Harry and Augusta were in the appropriate attire — green scrubs — and Coral had been thoroughly cleaned, much to her annoyance.

:I keep myself quite clean, thank you: she hissed. :Have I ever had a stench? Are my scales ever anything other than pristine?: She shivered. :Now I have soap scum between them. How is that sterile?:

Petting her head apologetically, Harry glanced at the people in the room.

They were part of Price's team, and had all been cleared by the Ministry to know of magic. After what had happened to Dumbledore, the Ministry had accepted that having a muggle medical team available was wise.

"Whenever you're ready, Harry," Price said gently.

Harry bit his bottom lip and nodded, before stepping beside Frank Longbottom's bed.

"I'm going to examine him first, to see how much scarring he has," Harry said, before doing just that, Coral around his wrist. He didn't find anything the MRI hadn't. "Alright, I'm going to start near the shunt," he said, focusing his magic and hissing under his breath.

Very little of the scar tissue dissolved, the rest remained stubbornly in place. "A lot of it is cursed scar tissue," he said as he moved on, carefully testing sections as he went, and finding, unfortunately, much of it was impervious to his magic.

"At least now we know," Price said gently. "Just do what you can. His vitals are still solid."

Harry moved down to Frank's neck, dissolving what he could, silently annoyed with himself for not being able to do more. Finally, after the spine, he moved to the man's hands, and then his legs and feet. If he had to guess, he would say he only removed ten percent of the scarring.

"That's all I can do," Harry said, before moving on to Alice.

Starting as he had with Frank, Harry began his work, all the while Augusta, Price and his team watched in silence.

It was like night and day.

Though there were still clusters of scarring he couldn't remove, there were many others he could, so much so Coral had to give his wrist a squeeze in warning, telling him he needed to slow down. He did so, smiling brightly as he moved onto the next pocket and then the next.

As he went on, he began to realize why Alice's condition was so different from Frank's. Unlike Frank, she had been cursed multiple times, off and on, over an extended period. He knew what the Cruciatus did to the victim, often causing them to thrash around uncontrollably. This was why Alice had more 'natural' scar tissue. She had suffered from as much, if not more, physical trauma as she had 'magical' trauma.

Finally, Harry finished, his hands tingling from the extended use of magic. He found himself being guided back into a chair.

"Alright there, lad?" Price asked.

Harry nodded, suddenly realizing his brow was covered in sweat and he was a little short of breath.

"I'll schedule another set of MRIs for them," Price said. "And from there we will take the next step."

Harry looked up, finding Augusta focused on him. He wasn't sure, but he could have sworn she had given him a smile.

O o O o O

Remus closed his eyes.

The past few days had been particularly trying and he didn't know what to do, as he had been unable to get through to Sirius and now there was no turning back for the man.

Remus had tried to convince him he was moving things along too quickly and that he should at least bring up the matter of adoption with Harry before going through with the application process. But he hadn't listened, and now he feared Sirius had ruined any chance of developing a real relationship with his godson.

Sirius had pushed for a decision to be made quickly and with as little 'outside' interference as possible — meaning no press (for which Remus was grateful for), but surely this decision deserved more time to be made. However, for good or ill, Dumbledore had offered to act as messenger, no doubt realizing the bullheaded Gryffindor would not be changing his mind and it would be best to focus on hopefully minimizing the damage.

He knew it was frustrating for Sirius, not knowing who was caring for Harry, but he wished the man had a bit more patience. He knew the letters to him from Harry had improved and had lost much of the awkwardness they had had before, but that by no means meant the boy was ready for Sirius to formally adopt him. But Sirius didn't see it that way, and though Remus could sympathize, he knew Harry better than his friend. Harry would not go along with this, especially after having lived with the mysterious caretakers for much of the past summer. Being the Defense professor, Remus could see Harry enjoyed his time with them simply by how he acted after returning from summer break. Whoever these people were, they were certainly good for Harry and made him feel as a child should — loved and cared for.

He heard Sirius enter the room and begin pacing in front of the fireplace impatiently.

"When do you think he'll arrive?" he asked.

Very soon, Dumbledore would be coming through the fireplace to inform them of the Adoption Board's decision.

"As soon as he can," Remus replied tiredly. "I really wish you hadn't—"

"Remus, he's my godson. I should be the one taking care of him, not strangers," Sirius stated firmly.

"Whoever they are, they're not strangers to him," Remus argued.

"He had never even known them before the summer!" Sirius nearly shouted.

"He hadn't known you either."

That silenced Sirius.

Fortunately, before things could get anymore strained between them, the fireplace flared green, and Albus stepped out.

Sirius turned toward the Headmaster, hope in his eyes. Remus stood up.

Albus motioned them to sit before taking the seat beside the fireplace. Remus sat back down, but Sirius ignored the silent request.

"Well?" he asked.

Remus noticed an envelope in Albus' old hands and wondered if Sirius had spotted it, though he doubted it.

"Sirius, I am sorry, but the Ministry, after carefully considering many aspects of Harry's situation and hearing the boy's unfiltered wishes, has decided he is to remain with his current caretakers, and in fact, they are now his permanent guardians," Dumbledore answered as gently as he could while laying it all out in only a few breaths.

Like a band-aid.

Sirius gaped like a fish, and Remus' heart went out to him, but it was not like he hadn't warned him.

Sirius, like so many times in the past, had placed blinders on himself. He had focused so hard on making what he imagined a reality that he had refused to even consider that his attempts may fail and have undesirable consequences. Perhaps it was the years in Azkaban, but it seemed to Remus that, sound mind or not, his

friend had never really grown up.

"B-but . . . how can that be their . . . their decision?" Sirius managed, now sitting down.

"Sirius, the Adoption Board takes the child's wishes to heart, and so should you," Albus stated, before handing Sirius the envelope and taking a slow step back. "I need not tell you that you have pushed too hard and have ignored sound advice, so I will just say I hope you have not completely lost what you have so desperately pursued."

Sirius looked down, his thumb passing over the end of his name that had been handwritten on the outside of the envelope.

"Thank you, Albus," Remus said, seeing as Sirius was beyond words.

Albus gave them a parting nod before disappearing into the flames of the floo.

Sirius flipped the envelope over and pulled out the bit of parchment before unfolding it.

"What is it? A record of the decision?" Remus asked softly.

With his hand shaking slightly, Sirius shook his head no. Remus moved and sat beside him, looking over his arm to peer at the scrawled words he instantly recognized.

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Dear Mr. Black,

Although I was told writing this letter was unnecessary, I felt I should.

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Remus internally blanched at reading 'Mr. Black.'

Oh, Sirius, you fool.

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I can't say I was all that surprised when I was told a board had been called to select a permanent guardian for me earlier this week. I had been expecting something of the sort for some time now, to be honest, though I had thought you would write to me

about it before things got so serious. But I guess I was wrong.

I'm not mad, and I can't even say I'm all that upset, just. . . .

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Remus' heart clenched, seeing how Harry had clearly struggled with putting his feelings into words from the fat blots of ink marring the page. The sentence was left unfinished. He glanced up at Sirius, finding the man near tears. He frankly felt little pity for him just then, and looked back to the page.

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Well, I just wanted to let you know that my choice ultimately wouldn't have changed even if things had been done differently. I thought you would want to know that.

Your godson,

Harry J. Potter

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Though it was clear to Remus that Harry's guardian, or guardians, had likely given him some suggestions in how to phrase certain parts of the letter, the message itself remained Harry's alone.

Remus swallowed the lump in his throat as Sirius dropped the parchment.

"I'm such an idiot," he whispered, head in his hands.

Remus couldn't help but silently agree.

O o O o O

Draco entered the Ministry's huge dining hall alongside his parents. In his best robes, his eyes took in the place before him. He had been to many parties and dinners, of course, but never one so exquisite, or well guarded. Just outside the hall, Aurors could be seen throughout. Granted, with the Dark Lord, and the Ministry playing host to so many foreign dignitaries, it was no surprise.

Within the massive dining chamber, there were already nearly a hundred people, talking in clusters of five or more while waiting for the momentous function to officially begin — which would be when the men (or rather man and boy) of honor arrived.

He recognized several prominent members of society, including many who were on the Board with his father, members of the Wizengamot, and important family Heads. However, there were many more he did not recognize, and whose attire suggested they were not part of the Ministry, or England for that matter.

Going further in the room, his father led them toward the front area.

The ceiling was decorated with silk ribbons and floating crystals, while the room itself was full of richly clad, round tables surrounded by ornately dressed guests. Draco focused on the tables themselves. Each table had twenty placements and on each center plate was a slip of parchment with a name and, occasionally, their title or occupation. Draco also noticed that two of the front tables, which were just below the platform where the awards would be given, each had a unique chair that seemed fit for royalty.

"Draco, you will be here," his father said, motioning to the table to their right (which happened to be one with a fancy chair). "Your mother and I will be seated at that table over there."

Draco looked where his father indicated, wondering why they had been separated.

"We will be seated with Severus, while you will be with Mr. Potter," his father blandly explained before leaning over him. "I need not tell you your actions will be under intense scrutiny. Do not embarrass the Malfoy name."

"Yes, father," Draco said obediently, looking back to his own table and finding his seat was beside the elaborate chair. It didn't take him long to realize it was Harry's chair, especially when he spotted the over-the-top seating card.

*****Harry J. Potter*****

The Boy-Who-Lived

Order of Merlin – First Class

Parselmouth and Expert User of Parselmagic

It was surrounded by a thick, pulsating, golden border and the ink was charmed to sparkle without pause. It was absolutely nauseating.

Certain Harry wouldn't really like his card, Draco fought back a snort as his parents moved away, heading toward a few adults who were congregating near their own table. Deciding to keep himself occupied, Draco took a moment to see who else was

at his table. He found Neville was on Harry's right, before continuing around, reading:

Andy Hovel — *First Werewolf Cured*

Mr. Jake Hovel — *Father of Andy Hovel*

Prof. Pomona Sprout — *Head of Hufflepuff House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Herbology Professor*

Mr. Walter McCaffrey — *First Adult Werewolf Cured*

Healer Hippocrates Smethwyk — *Healer-in-Charge over Dai Llewellyn Ward*

Healer Timothy Chekhov — *Elder Researcher of Magical Ailments and Curses*

Mr. Lee V. Quan — *Former Werewolf, Member of the International Confederation of Wizards, Representative of Vietnam*

Ms. Rita Skeeter — *Reporter for the Daily Prophet*

Cornelius Fudge — *Minister of Magic*

Ms. Dolores Umbridge — *Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic*

Mr. Amos Diggory — *Head of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures Department*

Mrs. Abelie Cagnina — *Researcher of Obscure Magics*

Mr. Bartemius Crouch Sr. — *Head of the International Magical Cooperation Department*

Mrs. Emi Vilmire — *Reporter for Magical World Press*

Mrs. Griselda Marchbanks — *Head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority, Elder of the Wizengamot*

Ticket Winner — *Seat Nu. 18*

Ignoring the 'Ticket Winner' placeholder, Draco blinked, now really understanding why his father had been so firm with him. These people were seriously important. The other two seats were of course reserved for Goyle and himself.

A few minutes later, he was fortunately joined by Greg and Neville, their guardians heading off to different tables before anyone else joined him near his table.

"Hey, Draco, been here long?" Greg asked.

"Not too long," Draco said, giving a nod to Neville before looking beyond them. Professor Sprout, Amos Diggory, and a few of the other adults had arrived.

"Care to take your seats, boys?" Amos kindly asked. "I believe things will start shortly."

Not needing to be told twice, they took their places, feeling a little awkward about being so close to the large, gaudy chair reserved for Harry. However, before things could get too uncomfortable, the tables all filled (or nearly) and every eye turned to the platform, the Minister stepping up to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming to this momentous occasion. As Minister of Magic, I am thrilled to host this Award Ceremony for two extraordinary individuals — Severus Snape and Harry Potter," Fudge announced.

Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him, wearing a golden medallion (clearly his own Order of Merlin Medal) over the most intense robes Draco had ever seen. Draco had to give it to the Headmaster. He could look quite impressive and intimidating when he wanted to be.

Next to the Headmaster was a row of important dignitaries, eagerly waiting to shake the hands of the newest Order of Merlin recipients. Most of them looked rather foolish, to be honest. Draco wondered if it was a requirement to appear so flippant to become a politician, no matter nationality.

Suddenly realizing he had missed the rest of Fudge's speech, Draco refocused as everyone suddenly stood up, turning to where the Minister had just waved his arm.

Professor Snape and Harry walked out, looking very sharp and powerful, before Fudge motioned the place to sit once more so everyone could see the most awaited part of the ceremony.

In layered dress robes, bordered by white and green embroidery, Snape shook hands and received the award first, bowing slightly for the Headmaster to hang the medal around his neck as the place roared with applause. After accepting the customary words of praise and congratulations, Severus stepped aside and waited for Harry to come up next.

Wearing black and gold robes, lined with thin red needlework, Harry went forward, receiving a slightly louder applause than the potions master. As he walked, he kept his left arm bent and against his side. Upon closer inspection, Draco could make out Coral wrapped around his arm in clear view. It was fun to watch the dignitaries' reactions to her as they shook Harry's right hand. One lady looked as if she might faint, especially when Coral shifted up a bit. Another looked intrigued, staring at Coral and barely giving Harry a glance.

Finally, Harry too received the medal and stood beside Severus to get their pictures taken for the Press.

Draco could hear Rita Skeeter's quill scratching away behind him. He hoped the other reporters in the room would write better than she no doubt would.

What had father called her? he wondered. '*A vicious witch with a destructive quill'?*

Fudge went back to the podium and said some stuff Draco didn't really care about, save for the part that dinner would begin shortly before Severus and Harry stepped off the platform and made their way to their tables, followed by the rest who been up there.

Draco could tell Harry was a little nervous as he took his place while everyone at the table stood up once again out of respect.

"Allow me to make the introductions, Mr. Potter," the Minister said, hurrying to his place directly across from Harry at the table. "I must say, you make me proud to be Minister. To serve such an amazing young citizen!" Fudge gushed as they all sat.

"Thank you, Minister," Harry answered politely, his eyes pausing slightly at the parchment on his plate.

Draco wasn't sure which Harry was likely more annoyed with, his name card or the Minister.

The Minister made the round of introductions, though he struggled at the last individual. A red haired man who had taken the 'Ticket Winner — *Seat Nu. 18*' spot.

"And Mister . . ." he strained. "Mister Weatherbe. . . ."

"Actually, Minister, it's Weasley, Arthur Weasley," the man gently corrected.

"Ah, of course, my apologies," the Minister quickly smoothed over. "You won the seat drawing, due to an unfortunate last minute cancelation."

"Yes, sir. I feel quite privileged," he said, before turning to Harry. "Please allow me to thank you on behalf of my family, Mr. Potter. Although we never personally encountered werewolves, my wife and I can now sleep more peacefully, knowing there is one less danger in the world facing our children."

"You're welcome, sir," Harry answered, not knowing what else to say.

The food appeared a moment later, and Draco took the opportunity to get Harry's attention before anyone else could.

"Harry, my father wanted me to tell you the Crabbes were not able to make it tonight because Vince and his father caught a nasty bout of wizard's flu and Mrs. Crabbe remained home to care for them," Draco said.

"Oh, I hope they feel better soon then," Harry said, glancing at Mr. Weasley and putting together who the 'last minute cancelation' involved.

"Mr. Potter, I understand you have been working with Madam Pomfrey for some time, improving your parselmagic?" Smethwyk asked.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, not surprised by the man's knowledge. Everyone at school knew he worked in the infirmary on the weekends, after all.

"Have you progressed in other healing areas yet?" he asked, many around the table visibly becoming eager to hear his answer.

"Well, yeah, a bit," Harry admitted. "She's been helping me with reconstructive healing, mostly where scars are concerned."

Healer Smethwyk was clearly intrigued, while Healer Chekhov and Mrs. Abelie Cagnina (the researcher of obscure magics) were clearly itching to shoot more in depth questions.

"My-my, Harry, quite ambitious," Skeeter said before anyone else could speak up. "May I call you Harry?" she asked, though she didn't give him a chance to answer. "Is your desire to cure scars because of the one you bear on your forehead?"

Only his father's words echoing in his ears prevented Draco from speaking up, not that he would have had the opportunity to, as Professor Sprout shifted forward.

"Ms. Skeeter, trust me when I say such questions, at least phrased in that way, will win you no favors with him or his friends, and Mr. Potter has many friends," Professor Sprout stated, a slight warning in her voice.

Draco was suddenly reminded that the Hufflepuff mascot was a badger.

O o O

Harry couldn't help but be touched by Professor Sprout's defense of him, and he was once again reminded of why he was grateful to be a Hufflepuff.

"Pardon my question then, Harry," Skeeter said barely keeping her voice level.

Harry gave her a forgiving nod, deciding a silent response was best in this instance. The Flamels had warned him about her, and he wasn't about to let things get out of hand if he could prevent it. With that in mind, he decided to throw Skeeter a sort of peace offering as he looked back to Healer Smethwyk.

"When people first learned what I could do, they asked me if I could heal scars or grow back limbs. Since then, I've been curious about finding out. I honestly never really thought about healing my own scars. They've either always been a part of me —" he motioned to his forehead, "—or something I'm . . . well, happy to live with." He rolled up his sleeve, fully revealing Coral and a portion of the scar on his hand and wrist partially covered by her vibrant coils.

Harry glanced at Skeeter, meeting her eyes for a brief moment. She blinked and gave a barely noticeable nod.

There. He hadn't needed to do that, and she knew it. He did it because he wanted to.

"So, uh, Mr. Potter?"

Harry turned toward Andy, who promptly blushed when he had Harry's attention.

"Yeah, Andy?"

"Not that I want you to, but you could heal my scar now?" he asked, glancing down at his arm a werewolf had bitten the previous year.

Harry couldn't restrain a sigh. "Unfortunately, for right now, curse scars are still impossible for me to heal. I don't understand them well enough yet for me to manipulate my magic in the way that's needed. Or at least that's what Madam Pomfrey believes."

"Some believe, including myself, that curses affect the physical part of the body as much as the individual's magic," Mrs. Abelie Cagnina said. "It's just a theory, but this

seems to support it."

Harry blinked. "Could you tell me more about this theory?" he asked, immediately thinking of Neville's parents, just as Neville was.

"Of course, I would be happy to—"

"As interesting as this is, I fear much of this is over most of our heads," Crouch Sr. interrupted apologetically, ever the diplomat.

Harry and those who had been following paused and slowly nodded, feeling a little bad about leaving the majority of the table out of the conversation.

"I will send you an owl with my notes later, if you wish, Mr. Potter," Cagnina said after a moment.

"Thanks, it would be a big help to me," Harry said.

"Well, Cedric tells me you are often quite busy at school. How do you keep up with everything, Mr. Potter?" Amos Diggory asked. "It's quite amazing for a boy your age."

"I suppose part of it is because, before Hogwarts, I was always busy. I'm used to it. The only difference now is what I'm busy with," Harry said with a shrug.

"What sorts of things were you busy with before Hogwarts?" Madam Marshbanks asked, curious.

"Chores and school mostly," Harry said evasively, suddenly wishing someone would change the subject.

Fortunately, Mr. Weasley unknowingly came to his rescue.

"Oh, forgive me for this question, but I've always been curious, and as you grew up in the Muggle world . . . can you tell me the function of a rubber duck?" Mr. Weasley asked, causing a few around the table to roll their eyes or inwardly groan.

"Oh, um. They're just muggle toys parents give their kids to play with during a bath," Harry answered, recalling the collection of rubber ducks Dudley went through. Somehow, they would lose their heads or their ability to squeak or squirt.

"Really?" he asked, for some reason surprised. "Amazing. I always thought they had a more important purpose."

"Hem-hem."

Harry couldn't help but wonder if a dying creature had somehow gotten under their table before he realized the sound had come from the pink woman beside the Minister.

"We all know Muggles are inferior. Why are you so surprised, Mr. Weasley?" asked Madam Umbridge.

Harry raised an eyebrow, and the urge to confront her idiotic statement quickly became something he couldn't fight.

"Excuse me, Madam, but if muggles are truly inferior, how was Voldemort gravely injured by one of them earlier this year?" Harry asked, stunning most at the table with his relaxed use of the Dark Lord's name. "Sure, muggles don't have magic, but they make do without it through advanced machines and science. Also, it's not like we don't have 'useless' objects. I mean, honestly, how useful is a remembrall?"

Mr. Lee laughed. "Quite right, Mr. Potter."

"Well, even so, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said, undeterred. "I sincerely doubt muggles would have been able to do anything remotely like cure Lycanthropy."

"Actually, Madam, Professor Snape got the very 'vaccine' idea from muggles. They've been making vaccines for *decades*. It's why things like Small Pox, Polio, and Measles are no longer as big an issue to them as they have been in the past. I'm not downplaying what Professor Snape did, but he'll be the first to explain that he started with muggle techniques, adjusted them a bit where the magic was concerned, and, bam! made the vaccine. So, in a way, we have muggles to thank for the mass production of the cure as much as the Professor."

Umbridge narrowed her eyes, looking seriously affronted.

:Well, she is certainly a nasty piece of work: Coral stated. Harry silently agreed.

Mr. McCaffrey, who was beside Mr. Hovel, chuckled. "Admit it, Madam, he's got you there."

Umbridge huffed and glanced at the Minister, no doubt looking for some support—which he wouldn't or couldn't provide. She looked back at Harry. "Well, I can see there is no reasoning with you, Mr. Potter. For whatever reason you have it in your head that muggles are better than wizards, and I frankly find that appal—"

"Pardon me, Madam, but Mr. Potter suggested nothing of the sort," Mrs. Vilmire, the international reporter cut in. "He was merely pointing out that muggles have a different way of doing things and have been doing some things longer than we have."

"Precisely," Madam Marchbanks agreed. "And I for long have believed for a long time that we have as much to learn from muggles as they have from us. It's just such a pity there is so much animosity and bigotry between our two societies. When I was young, I had imagined that a day would come where our two worlds would join, and everyone would get along." She smiled sadly. "I now know that dream is a bit naive, but it is still nice to see instances where we learn from muggles."

Several around the table nodded, though if it was because they actually agreed with Marchbanks was another matter.

Fortunately, before things could get any more heated or tense, their dinner disappeared and dessert appeared.

"Yes! I love treacle tarts," Greg said, apparently unable to help himself.

The rest of the meal went by with little issue, though Umbridge was clearly stewing away over her banoffee pie.

Harry frankly didn't care, and glanced over at Professor Snape's table. From where he was, he identified Dumbledore, Colin and Dennis Creevey, the Malfoys, Madam Pomfrey, Aage Brown, and Remus at the table. He supposed his godfather was around somewhere in the hall, but he had yet to see him and did not particularly want to at the moment anyway.

As for his guardians, they had come, but under disguise. They had a few identities they went under when they had business at the Ministry or at Gringotts, and they were under them now, sitting a few tables down from his own.

Even though they could not be close to him, as it would raise questions as to who they were and how they knew Harry, it was nice that they had witnessed his award ceremony.

Finally, the evening came to a close and the Minister stood up and went back up to the podium, addressing the hall and thanking everyone for attending, etcetera, etcetera. With that, the people began to stand and make their way out of the chamber.

Harry could hardly wait to get home and made his way to the Headmaster, who

would escort him home, or at least to Hogwarts where he would floo to the Flamel's.

Shaking hands with people going by, he tried to ignore the hero worship and was happy Draco and Neville were acting as a minor buffer where possible. However, with each step, he couldn't help shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. It was only when he reached Dumbledore that he realized his head was faintly aching, the pain originating at his scar.

"Ah, Harry, ready to go?" Dumbledore asked lightly, people around acting annoyingly giddy at being so close to Harry.

"Yes, sir," Harry managed, trying to ignore the faint feelings that were managing to come through the accursed link.

Apparently, his discomfort was detected by Dumbledore, and before Harry knew it, they were on their way out of the hall.

O o O o O

Vince was confused. He had thought they would be attending the award ceremony for Professor Snape and Harry, but now they weren't. Had something happened? Had the Ministry changed dates or something? But what were they doing instead? Where were they going? And why had father insisted on them wearing their nicest robes if they were no longer going to the Ministry?

Knowing better than to verbalize his questions, he stepped by his father and mother and prepared his stomach for a side-along apparation.

They arrived in a clearing, and the feeling in the air immediately had Vince on edge; however, only when they turned around did he feel in danger.

"Ah, you have arrived."

Vince couldn't believe his eyes.

It was Voldemort. The Dark Lord. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Before he could try to think about anything else, his parents kneeled and he wisely followed suit.

"Yes, my Lord. We are happy to serve you. And as you requested, my son has come as well," his father said, head still bowed.

"So I see," the Dark Lord said approvingly.

Vince was so scared he couldn't move.

"Well, rise. I have a task for your son."

Vince instinctively knew it involved nothing good, and he surprised himself by resisting as his instincts cried out to him.

"Vince, walk with me, son. There is nothing to fear," his dad urged in his ear as they stood.

Vince was not so sure, and neither was his mother. Vince looked up to his father's face, hoping to find something that would explain what was happening, but he found nothing.

Nothing.

And that scared him more than being in the presence of Voldemort.

"Markov, what's going on?" she asked her husband, horrified.

He didn't answer.

"Stand here, young Crabbe," Voldemort said, motioning to a small circle on the ground that was surrounded by odd symbols that branched over to another circle which was occupied by the Dark Lord.

The hair on the back of Vince's neck stood on end as he dug his heels into the earth before him, trying to stop his father from forcing him forward.

He would be the first to admit that he wasn't all that smart, but something was seriously wrong here!

"No, please, I don't want to," he managed, hoping he hadn't sounded pathetic as he pushed back against his father. "Dad, stop!"

He didn't listen; it was as if he was no longer able to.

He heard laughter, and he suddenly noticed they were not alone with the Dark Lord. There were people in dark cloaks standing around them.

"Markov, stop, why are you doing this?" his mother cried as she hurried forward. "No!"

Apparently she too realized something was wrong, and pulled on her husband's arm, trying to get him to release their boy.

Vince struggled, no longer trying to understand what was happening. All he knew was that he wanted . . . no, *needed* to get away as he saw his mom pull out her wand from her sleeve.

"*Stupefy*!" his mother cried.

A red ray shot forth and hit his father, bashing him away. Vince stumbled forward, trying to keep his legs from collapsing like jelly before he felt his mother's hand close lovingly around his arm, stabilizing him.

He prepared himself for apparition, desperately hoping his mother could whisk them away from this nightmare.

"Idiot woman," Voldemort hissed. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Green flashed in his vision before Vince saw his mother fall, and for a long moment he couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

The Dark Lord sneered. "Peh, mothers. . . ."

Vince closed his eyes, telling himself over and over that it wasn't real, that all of it was a nightmare, nothing more, but as he opened his eyes, he froze, realizing where he was standing.

In the circle.

"There, now was that really so hard?" Voldemort asked with an evil grin as he turned his wand toward him. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Green filled his vision, but it was soon replaced by bright white light.

Death, Vince decided, was nothing to fear.

O o O o O

Next part, *Ultimatum*, is under construction.

A/N: Not sure when I will have time to write/post again, but it will happen eventually. Sorry for the long waits, but it unfortunately can't be helped. Anyway, thanks again for all of the reviews ^^

Ultimatum

Questions/Fears Concerning:

The Weasleys — They'll come in eventually, there just hasn't been a good opportunity to have Harry meet them yet. Same goes for Hermione. However, I can't promise they will have any big play in the story when they do come in. Sorry.

Part 30: Ultimatum

Harry wasn't sure what was happening but he didn't like it at all. His equilibrium was totally off and his scar was throbbing horribly, so much so that his eyes were watering. The only good thing about the whole situation was that he was now home, having just departed from Hogwarts with Dumbledore's assistance a moment before he really started feeling terrible.

"Here, Harry, just focus on staying on the couch," Nicholas advised as Dumbledore and Perenelle spoke in the background. "Hopefully this will pass quickly."

Harry doubted it would, but was too preoccupied to comment as his vision seemed to waver, the Flamels' voices and Dumbledore's fading in and out.

"When did this start?" Nicholas asked Dumbledore.

"Not long before we headed out of the Ministry," he answered.

"Dad, stop!"

Harry jumped, the shout ringing in his ears as his vision tried to refocus. It was like looking through opaque glass, but it was soon clear enough for Harry to know . . . he was seeing through Voldemort's eyes.

It was dark, and everything was misshapen and blurred. However, he could make out enough. There were three forms, one smaller than the other two. The small one was beside another, while the third was a short distance away.

"Merlin!" Perenelle's voice momentarily broke through the living nightmare, but Harry was soon swallowed up once more.

A violent flash of green blazed before vanishing to reveal a fallen form beside the smallest figure. He didn't know what had happened to the other individual, but he didn't have time to ponder that.

"Peh, mothers," Voldemort sneered.

It was then that Harry suddenly came to the disturbing realization. . . . This was a family.

:Harry!:

"Hold him!"

Hands seized him, not that he was aware as he fell back under.

"-so hard?"

Harry's breath caught as he felt Voldemort's hate surge, his full attention on the remaining form — the kid, who was, Harry thought, perhaps as young as himself.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Triumph roared across the bond as runes ignited all around the Dark Lord and fallen child. Power pulsed, and in that instant Harry knew Voldemort had regained and surpassed his former strength as energy exploded forth.

Finally, Harry surfaced, but not before he heard Voldemort give a sickening, victorious chortle, three bodies lying crumpled a short distance away.

O o O

Dumbledore reared back as Perenelle waved both him and Nicholas away from Harry. Without a word, she scooped Harry up, and the Headmaster couldn't help but be impressed by the ease in which she did so.

He wasn't quite sure what had just happened, other than the obvious fact that Harry's scar was involved. He truly wished he understood the bond better. Having just witnessed the effects on the boy, it was quite troubling to not know what exactly was happening, not to mention how to help.

He had never needed to physically restrain anyone as they just had to do with Harry to prevent him from hurting himself. As it was, Harry had managed to bang the side of his head against the hard portion of the couch's armrest on his way to the floor before any of them knew what was happening. Added to that, Coral barely managed to slither away in time to prevent injury.

Dumbledore glanced at Nicholas, not quite sure why the man hadn't simply cast something like *Petrificus Totalus* on Harry, but now was not the time to question him.

He looked back at Perenelle.

Perenelle was gently rocking Harry, waiting for him to become aware enough to respond to her soft mutterings in his ear. Dumbledore couldn't make out her words, but it was clear Harry was benefiting from them.

Finally, Harry's eyes cracked open and his breathing calmed, if only a tiny bit.

"Harry?" Nicholas tried.

Harry closed his eyes.

"Voldemort—he . . . he killed a family. I don't know who they were. I couldn't see them all that well. Everything was really blurry," he managed.

"What happened? What did you see?" Nicholas asked.

"There were runes on the ground." Harry's voice went completely flat. "He's not sick anymore."

"Can you tell us what you remember?" Perenelle asked softly.

With that, Harry slowly nodded and told them everything he saw. Afterwards, Dumbledore asked for his memory of the vision, hoping he would be able to discern more of what had happened.

OoOoO

Narcissa smiled as she watched Draco hurry outside to fly on his broom after finishing his breakfast, seemingly without a care in the world as her thoughts wandered to less happy things. How would Draco cope if they had to leave? Would he understand? Would he hate them? Would he hate Lucius for the mistakes he had made that had brought them to this state?

And yes, they had been mistakes. She had always viewed them as such, but what could she have done to prevent them? Lucius had always been stubborn and unyielding. It was only now that he was beginning to consider other options, though that was due to necessity more than anything else.

She shook her head, now more than ever grateful for Severus Snape. Having a contingency plan in case anything happened gave her some peace of mind, but knowing Severus truly cared for Draco and would do everything in his power to protect him. . . . That eased her fears more than all of the back up plans ever could.

Entering her living room, she went to the fireplace. She had promised Deborah Crabbe that she would check in on them and make sure she didn't need anything and that her son and husband were recovering from the Wizard's Flu. On a more selfish note, she wanted to get a recipe from her. Deborah's cakes were legendary. It was also another reason why Markov was as . . . large as he was.

Kneeling down, she made the firecall. "Crabbes' Abode!"

Sticking her head in the flames, she had expected to find Deborah in the lounge chair not far from the fireplace, but the room was empty.

"Deborah?" she called.

She waited for a response, but received none. She frowned, knowing it wasn't too early. Besides, Deborah was an early riser. She had to be to cook the large breakfasts her 'boys' enjoyed. Perhaps she had caught the flu as well?

Narcissa decided to call for their house elf.

"Scrubby!"

-Pop-

The moment the house elf appeared, Narcissa knew something was horribly wrong. Yanking on his ears and moving back and forth, Narcissa was barely able to make out anything Scrubby was saying.

"Awful, awful! Help! Help! Masters—they, they!" His words fell into frantic, incomprehensible babbles as he suddenly began sobbing.

Narcissa didn't bother to ask or announce her intentions. She pulled out of the firecall and then flooed over.

"Scrubby, take me to Deborah!" Narcissa ordered.

Scrubby took her hand.

-Pop-

She appeared in Markov's study, which was a shock in itself. He never allowed anyone inside it, not even his wife. However, her arrival in the 'forbidden' place was instantly the furthest thing from her mind.

The room was in absolute shambles. There were burn marks on the walls, gashes in

the furniture, and holes in the floor and ceiling, but all of that was barely noticed by Narcissa as she took in what was directly in front of her.

There, kneeling in front of his desk, and weeping inconsolably, was an injured Markov Crabbe with blood everywhere; however, it immediately became clear to Narcissa that not all of it was Markov's. Before him, alarmingly still, lay Deborah and Vincent.

"Markov, what happened?" Narcissa cried, hurrying forward to check on his family.

Firmly placing her fingers on their throats, she desperately hoped they were not as gone as they appeared, but her fears were confirmed.

They were dead.

"I did it. I did it. I killed them," Markov rambled between sobs, now rocking.

Narcissa's wand was instantly in her hand, but she quickly realized it was unneeded.

Markov's wand was broken, snapped in two beside Deborah's cold form.

"Kill me. Kill me. *Please*."

"Why did you do this?" Narcissa snarled, her despair and disbelief now morphing into outrage and indescribable disgust.

Deborah had occasionally expressed her fears concerning the man's temper, sharing with her the blind rages he would fall into, especially if intoxicated, but Narcissa never would have believed he'd ever go this far. However, the lost lives proved otherwise.

"No control. No control. I want to die. Deserve to, deserve to. Kill me, kill me. Please."

Narcissa wanted to. She really did. Seeing her friend, perhaps her best friend, lifeless on the floor beside one of her son's lifelong playmates. . . . It took everything within her being not to do as the man asked. But perhaps that was why. The man wanted to die, and she'd be damned if she did anything this monster wanted.

She called the aurors.

OoOoO

Dumbledore slowly breathed out, greatly saddened by the news he would soon have

to give the rest of his staff. This kind of news was never easy to give, not to mention receive, and he had to mentally bolster himself to deliver it.

He straightened as he felt the wards alert him to Severus' approach to the door. Part of him wished he could wait to inform the man, but as he was the boy's Head of House, it would be wrong to wait any longer. He deserved to know before the rest of the staff, and certainly before the Daily Prophet informed the public.

"You called for me, Headmaster?" Severus asked once he had entered and shut the door.

"Yes, Severus. Please, have a seat."

Severus' eyes gave the slightest hint of narrowing. "What's happened?" he asked as he took the offered chair, instantly knowing this would be bad news.

Albus privately marveled at his ex-spy's intuitiveness. Well, at least he could get straight to it.

"I recently learned from Madam Bones that Markov Crabbe has murdered his wife and son. They were found by Narcissa earlier this morning in their home. Although the investigation is still open, it is believed Markov became intoxicated and fell into a rage sometime late last night."

Albus watched as Severus quelled a multitude of emotions threatening to show on his face. It was most unnatural, but being a former spy it was no wonder.

"Did he have anything to say?" Severus asked, his tone not quite as controlled as his expression.

"According to Amelia, the man has gone mad. In his ramblings, he admits his sin and asks to die."

Severus' jaw clenched. "May he get his wish then."

Albus understood the harsh sentiment and found part of himself silently agreeing even though he knew such feeling was unhealthy, no matter the situation.

"Did Madam Bones tell you anything else?" Severus asked. "Was there a struggle? I find it hard to believe Deborah would have allowed things to escalate so far without trying something to stop him."

Not surprised by Severus' desire to know details, he answered. "Yes. Madam Bones

suspects over a dozen spells were exchanged in the office where they were found."

Severus' lips thinned, and Albus suspected the tragedy was really beginning to sink in.

"In his office?" he asked, a hint of puzzlement beneath.

"That's what Amelia told me. Why?" Dumbledore replied, now curious as to why that detail had troubled the younger wizard.

"Markov doesn't allow anyone in his office, not even his wife. Why would the fight occur there?"

"I don't know, but perhaps Amelia will discover why as she continues her investigation; though, she admitted to me that learning further details will be difficult because Markov snapped his wand."

"He snapped his own wand?" Severus asked incredulously, obviously reevaluating everything he had just been told. "Now that's getting a bit too convenient."

"From that you are suspecting a set up?" Dumbledore asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Innocent or not, I think something more is going on than him simply murdering his family in a drunken frenzy. Markov is capable of many despicable things — while sober and not — but from what you've just told me . . . my instincts are telling me that what this looks like is not what actually happened — not completely at least."

"I see. Well, we will have to trust that Madam Bones will get to the truth, no matter what it is."

"Fortunately, Madam Bones is the one capable department head of the Ministry," Severus said. "I'm confident she'll get to the truth."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement, though privately noted Arthur Weasley wasn't doing too bad of a job in his area of expertise.

"Is there anything else, Headmaster?" Severus asked after a moment.

"No, Severus; that was all I wanted to discuss, though you may like to know I have begun looking for anything concerning the family Voldemort murdered."

"Anything yet?"

"No, and as they were likely muggles, I fear we may never discover who they were."

"Has Mr. Potter recalled anything else from what he saw?"

"No. And I learned that the pensieve is of no help here."

"Too distorted?" Severus questioned.

"Completely. I admit I felt more than a bit queasy when I exited the pensieve after my failed attempt to witness Harry's vision for myself."

"Understandable," Severus said before slowly standing up.

There was nothing else to say, so Dumbledore gave him a nod of dismissal and Severus quietly left.

OoOoO

Harry entered the kitchen, having smelt the eggs and waffles all the way from his room.

"Good morning," he said, finding Nicholas at the stove and Perenelle giving a bit of bacon to the owl that had just delivered the Daily Prophet.

"Morning, Harry," Nicholas replied with a smile as he flipped an egg. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, though I wish I knew who they were," Harry answered, referring to the family he had seen Voldemort kill two nights before. Understandably, coming to terms with it was easier said than done, with or without good guardian support. "I don't like thinking that no one will ever know what happened to them."

Nicholas nodded his head in silent understanding as Harry turned to look at Perenelle, who was sitting at the table and being oddly quiet.

"Perenelle?" Harry asked, finding her staring down at that day's front page.

She looked up, the sadness in her eyes immeasurable.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, walking up to the table as Nicholas turned to his wife in concern.

Harry's eyes fell to the table's surface and he soon found the bold words of the Prophet's front article.

Aurors Suspect Markov Crabbe in Murders of Wife and Son!

Harry's blood ran cold at the name 'Crabbe.'

Did this mean. . . ?

His eyes scanned the article beneath the brazen title and spotted what he had feared. His friend's full name — Vincent Markov Crabbe.

No. It couldn't be. It was impossible. . . .

He barely managed to stabilize himself by gripping the edge of the table before his legs turned to jelly and his head was filled with an odd rushing sound.

Nicholas was at his side in an instant while Perenelle pulled out the chair beside him.

"He's dead. Vince is dead," he whispered, collapsing into the provided chair.

Being centuries old, Nicholas and Perenelle remained silent but by his side, knowing that there were times one could provide no words of comfort or condolence, and that sometimes the best thing to do was be silent.

OoOoO

Severus stepped into the Malfoys' living room that was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the cooling embers in the fireplace.

"We're alone," Lucius stated from a leather lounge chair. "Narcissa is with Draco. She is understandably still quite shaken."

"And Draco?" Severus asked.

"Upset." Lucius' face remained in the shadows, but Severus could make out a deep frown.

"And you?"

Lucius slowly exhaled. "Conflicted."

"You sense something off about it all," Severus stated, not revealing his own reservations.

Lucius nodded. "Which is why I didn't tell Draco any specifics. I'm going to wait until the investigation is over; so for now, all Draco knows is that one of his lifelong friends is dead. I've gone as far as to keep the Daily Prophets out of his sight."

"It's probably for the best," Severus agreed, recalling that morning's paper.

He really should have seen that coming. The Daily Prophet obviously didn't understand the need to complete an investigation and liked publicizing suspicions as fact. He wanted to kick himself. He should have suggested to Albus to forewarn the Flamels so Harry wouldn't get blindsided — as he likely had.

Severus fought back a sigh and refocused, as there was nothing for it now.

"When was the last time you saw Markov?" Lucius asked after a long moment.

"About a week ago, and I didn't notice anything suspicious or of concern," Severus answered.

"As did I." Lucius lifted his face, for the first time that night meeting Severus' eyes. "Severus, I cannot. . . ." He trailed off, his eyes growing even darker than the space surrounding him. "I cannot fight off a disturbing thought, try as I might. Do you believe the Dark Lord may be involved?"

"What makes you suspect he is?"

Lucius' jaw clenched. "Father's intuition."

"What does Narcissa think?"

"She feels Markov is responsible. Deborah had confided in her about a few . . . incidences. And I must admit, even without that knowledge, I believe, if drunk enough, Markov is capable of . . . what's happened."

"Then why the doubt?"

"It's a nagging feeling . . . though, perhaps it's just a feeling with no ounce of truth." Lucius' hand gripped the edge of his armrest. "Perhaps I can't stomach the thought of a father murdering his family — of butchering them. . . ."

"Or, perhaps you are right," Severus whispered, before returning to his normal volume. "I'll keep you informed of anything Dumbledore learns from Madam Bones."

"Thank you."

OoOoO

Sometimes Madam Bones hated her job. Well, it was probably more accurate to say she rarely liked her job.

Cases involving children were always the most difficult, and this one was turning out to be especially so. She had not known the Crabbes personally, but she had seen them around at Ministry events and the like. She had also seen their son a few times with them and knew he was the same age as her niece, Susan. And now he was gone, lying in the morgue with a tarp over his small form.

It was all beyond heartrending and made her want to leave work early to hug her niece and never let go.

But she had a job to do and she was going to do it. She'd be damned if she was going to let some Ministry moron screw this case up and fail to bring the person (or persons) responsible to justice. She would get to the truth and go through all the evidence just to be sure they had the right man. She wanted to do this right, not only so she would be able to sleep at night, but to ensure Vincent and his mother would be able to rest in peace.

Madam Bones frowned, thinking about the evidence they had gathered so far.

From the obliterated office, they had identified the use of several spells, including *diffindos, reductos, incendios,* and *expulsos.* There had clearly been more, but it was impossible to know for sure what they had been, especially as Markov had snapped his wand and Deborah's wand had been destroyed. They had found remnants of it on a burned portion of the carpet, and by the burn on Deborah's hand, it was easy to see what had happened.

However, there was something troubling Bones. For a wizard to snap his own wand was unheard of. It was practically blasphemy against one's very magic. Though, if he truly hated what he had done, he just might have done it.

Bones closed her eyes, unable to shake the image of Markov when she had first entered the house with the other aurors.

He was undeniably a broken man and out of his mind.

Stepping over a fallen chair, Bones exited Markov's office and made her way to Vince's room. Perhaps there would be something in there to shed some light on why Vince had been involved.

The house had been searched, of course, but that was more to ensure there were no other suspects on the property than to look for clues of what had happened.

She entered the child's room, silently passing Kingsley in the hall.

The room was as she would imagine most twelve year old boy rooms to be. There were Slytherin and Hogwarts memorabilia on the walls and on his desk, which had a stack of school books on the corner and a few sheets of parchment sprawled across its surface. The bed wasn't made and there were a few articles of clothing on the floor.

She approached the desk and couldn't help but feel her heart constrict.

There were letters, and one was half finished, no doubt written by Vincent in reply to the one beside it. It was to Draco Malfoy, talking about the gifts he was hoping to receive that Christmas only a few days away.

Suddenly, she heard weeping and she quickly knelt down toward the sound to find the Crabbe's house elf under the desk, hugging a green and silver scarf—presumably Vincent's.

Of course, she recalled Narcissa mentioning that the house elf had taken her to the Crabbes, but until now she hadn't seen it, so had been unable to question it. It only had to respond to its family, after all.

"Hello," she said gently, not wanting to frighten the little guy off.

He was startled, but remained where he was as he continued crying. The pillow sheet he was wearing was absolutely soaked.

"My name is Madam Bones, what is your name?" she asked.

He looked up with a sniffle. "Scrubby."

"Do you know who I am, Scrubby?"

He nodded. "You's the head madam of the aurors."

"That's right, and right now, I need your help."

Scrubby grew still, tears still on his face. "What's Madam Bones want with Scrubby?"

"I need to know what happened, so I can make sure justice is done. I want to make sure Mrs. Crabbe and her son can rest in peace. Please, do you know what happened?"

Scrubby choked back a sob. "They's dead." He then collapsed into wails.

"Shh, Scrubby, please, I know it's hard, but for your family, tell me what happened

before Narcissa came."

Somehow, Scrubby collected himself, his face moving from despair to fury.

"They's hurted Master! They's—they's brought Master and family and then cursed everything!"

"From the beginning, Scrubby. Tell me from when they arrived. Where were you when they came?" Bones kept her voice calm despite her pounding heart. She just might get to the truth!

"Scrubby was dusting in Master's office when I's heard them in the hall. Nasty, nasty people! Then they's came into Master's office, and they's be dragging Master, Mistress, and Young Master with them! Scrubby thought Scrubby's family was all dead, but Master wasn't. Master was asleep. They's made him so, Scrubby thinks. Then they's hurt Master and Scrubby heard the nasty tall man say 'Let's make this look convincing. Bella, have fun.' Evil-*evil* woman! She's then cursed Mistress and Young Master more, then snapped Master's wand!" Scrubby bellowed.

"Who were these nasty people? Do you know their names?" Bones asked, already having latched onto 'Bella' possibly being Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Scrubby only knows the evil woman was called 'Bella', and the two men were brothers. The tall one said 'Alright, brother, that's enough.'"

"Would you be able to recognize them if I showed you pictures?"

"Scrubby thinks so."

"Very good. Scrubby, did they know you were there?"

"No. Master ordered Scrubby to always remain silent, invisible, and out of the way whenever I's in his office. So Scrubby was when they's came until they's left."

"I see. Is there anything else you remember that you think might help me?"

Scrubby nodded, his eyes growing murderous. "When's they's leaving Master's office, evil woman said, 'Thank you for your contribution to the Dark Lord. I'm sure he appreciates it.' Then they's laughed!"

Madam Bones forced herself to appear completely at ease, immediately concluding this was a lot bigger than she had initially thought. If the Dark Lord was involved. . . .

"Thank you, Scrubby. You bring honor to your family. If you need help, don't hesitate

to come to me. I'll come back later with some photos, if that's alright?"

Scrubby nodded, before quietly grieving once more.

With that, she slowly stood and left the room.

OoOoO

Narcissa forced herself to be calm as she went further into Knockturn Alley and entered a filthy shop, dusting a few snowflakes from her shoulder. She couldn't believe Christmas was the next day. Going to the secure back room, she steeled herself for whatever she was about to learn.

Earlier that day, Severus had informed Lucius of what Madam Bones had revealed to Dumbledore (and thus to him). Voldemort was somehow involved in the deaths of Deborah and Vincent and Death Eaters had set Markov up. What was worse was that her sister was suspected to have partaken in the latter.

It was horrifying to consider what this meant, assuming it was true.

Why had the Dark Lord done this? Had he killed them himself? Why did he want the blame to fall on Markov? Had Markov angered the Dark Lord somehow?

Narcissa didn't know, but she needed to find out, which was what had brought her to Knockturn Alley.

There was only one person she could learn the truth from without raising dangerous suspicion.

Her sister.

"Ah, Cissy. Long time," a voice said from the corner.

"Hello, sister."

"You don't seem too happy to see me, little sister, even though you arranged this little meeting."

"I haven't seen you in a long time, and I'm honestly not in the best of moods at the moment, Bellatrix, so I apologize for not being more cordial."

"Aww, a bit depressed I see, and I suppose it's related to the Crabbes? So sad. For a father to turn against his family. . . . And you found them. It must have been quite a shock."

"Yes. Deborah was a dear friend, and her son was a friend of Draco's," Narcissa said, taking a seat on the barrel against the dark wall.

Bellatrix nodded understandingly, though Narcissa wondered why she even bothered. Her sister was never sympathetic and she certainly wasn't now.

Narcissa fought back a sigh before taking out a small wrapped gift from her coat. "Happy Christmas, Bella."

"Oh, why thank you, Cissy," she said, not sounding all that thankful as she took the offered gift. Her next words only confirmed her lack of Christmas cheer. "Well, why have you called me here? As sweet as it would be, I doubt it's because you wanted to give your big sister an early Christmas gift."

Narcissa locked eyes with her deranged sibling and chose her words carefully.

"As always, you are right, and as much as I wish we were still as close as we had been, we aren't; however, we are still sisters, still family," she said.

"What's your point?"

"I want the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"About the Crabbes. I want to know if Markov is truly guilty. As much as I despise the man, I want to know if he is actually responsible for what he's accused of."

"Why do you think I would know, Cissy? I am not an auror; I have not investigated the scene."

"If Markov is actually innocent, I can only think of one reason why this has happened."

Bella raised an eyebrow. "And that would be?"

"Markov displeased the Dark Lord."

Narcissa hadn't known what to expect, but the reaction she got from her sister alarmed her.

"HAHAAHAAHHAAHAHAAHAAA!" Laughing hysterically, Bellatrix could barely get enough air. "You—you think—" she laughed some more, tears coming out of her eyes. "You think Markov displeased the Dark Lord?" She didn't wait for Narcissa to

respond as she continued. "The Dark Lord is pleased by him, perhaps even grateful. If I had a son, I would have gladly handed him over to the Dark Lord."

Narcissa couldn't stop the sick feeling rising up in her stomach. Did this mean. . . ?

"It's such a shame Markov made things difficult though. Oh, I have no doubt he would have been greatly rewarded if he had been more cooperative."

"What do you mean?" Narcissa asked.

Sufficiently worked up, Bellatrix didn't bother considering her next words—just as Narcissa had hoped, though she would later wish she had remained ignorant. "Once Markov learned what was being required of him, he resisted, but he should have known better. We, Death Eaters, are *his*. The moment we accept the dark mark, we accept the great bequest and honor of serving him. There is no greater honor!"

"What was being required of him?" Narcissa quietly asked, afraid she already knew the answer . . . and she did.

"Why, his son, of course," Bella answered, as if it was obvious and perfectly acceptable.

"His son?"

"Oh, Cissy, Vincent was given such a grand task—to restore the Dark Lord's strength, and he has! Isn't it wonderful?"

Narcissa wanted to throw up. "Yes, exceedingly so," she managed as she stood, forcing a sincere looking smile. "Thank you, Bella, for telling me. It's excellent news. I must share it with Lucius, he will be thrilled."

She then left without another word.

OoOoO

It was finally Christmas, though Severus frankly didn't feel in the mood to celebrate anything, possibly ever again.

He was in the Headmaster's office for the second time that day. The first had been that morning and had involved him sharing what he had just learned from Lucius — the horrifying truth that the Crabbes, specifically Vincent, had been used to restore Voldemort to his former strength. What made the news worse was the realization that Harry had not simply seen an unknown family suffer (which was horrible

enough) but had seen his friend's.

Dumbledore took the information as well as could be expected and told Madam Bones as soon as he was able that Voldemort had done the horrendous act of using Vincent to restore himself. Thus, Bones now had the motive for the murders.

After that, the Headmaster also informed Nicholas Flamel of everything so he could prepare and act as he saw fit.

"You're worried," Severus observed as he sat down. "Of course, I think you'd be a fool not to be."

He wasn't sure why Albus had requested his presence, though Severus suspected he just wanted to talk to someone who knew what was going on. Or at least that was what he hoped. He didn't want to hear any more news, as it would probably be bad.

"Nicholas told me he would tell Harry tomorrow."

Severus didn't have to ask what Nicholas would share. He raised an eyebrow. "Would you prefer him not to?"

"It's not something I would want any child to ever learn. To know he had seen his friend's last moments. . . ."

"Would you rather Master Flamel keep it from him then?"

"Yes, at least for a time. Harry is too young to bear this, and to learn of it over the holidays. . . ?"

"He'll learn the truth eventually, and I frankly feel it's best for him to face it now," Severus said bluntly, forcing himself to squash back the memories of his former-future.

There had been too many instances where things would have been different if Harry had known things . . . been told the truth. . . . Part of Severus believed it had cost them the war.

"This knowledge is dangerous."

"So is ignorance," Severus countered.

"It may cost Harry what little of his innocence and childhood he has left," Albus said sadly.

"It cannot be helped, and it is better than being blindsided by it later."

"Yes, you are right, of course. I only hope Nicholas and Perenelle know what they're doing," he said after a long moment.

"Potter's in good hands. If anyone can guide him through this, it'll be them."

Dumbledore gave a soft, reluctant smile. "Yes, they do have centuries of experience."

OoOoO

It suddenly felt as if Dudley had just slugged his stomach, as if someone had replaced his guts with cement and the very air around him had been replaced with lead.

He had seen Vince die.

He had seen Voldemort strike down one of his friends.

Why did this happen? Why had it been Vince? Couldn't there have been something someone could have done?

Perenelle was gently hugging him, and though he took comfort in it, all he could think about was what he had seen.

Mrs. Crabbe fighting, fighting desperately to save her son, but all she had received for her efforts was death — in which her son soon followed.

At that, Harry couldn't help but think about his own mother.

Had she been that helpless? Standing in Voldemort's way only for him to swat her down like a bug?

Harry frowned.

How had he, a mere infant, lived? Why hadn't he died like Vince had?

Their situations had been identical, right?

As odd as it sounded, Harry had never seriously thought about how and why he had survived that Halloween night. Everyone treated it as a mystery and he had never bothered to question it beyond that.

What made him so special? What had actually made him 'The-Boy-Who-Lived'?

He refused to believe it had been something he had done. He had only been a baby and would not have understood the danger he had been in.

So, had it been his mother? Had his mother done something before she had died? Had she found a way to counter the killing curse and placed it on his person? If so, why hadn't she saved herself? Had she not had time?

Harry had proved the Cruciatus could be blocked, so it stood to reason the killing curse could be as well, especially if one considered the fact that he had survived it. It was only a matter of discovering how, then, perhaps, he would be able to make the spell obsolete. If he could make a protection against it, as he had with crucio, maybe he would be able to share it. Maybe he could make everyone, especially those he cared about, immune.

He knew it would take a great deal of time and work. Likely more time and effort than it was taking him to place the crucio protection on himself, but if there was a chance of preventing what had befallen Vince and his family from happening again, he would do it.

Harry would later admit the hunt for this ultimate protection became an unwavering obsession.

OoOoO

Draco heaved in a deep sigh.

The funeral was going to take place the following day, and was going to be small and closed to the public. But that was far from Draco's mind.

His father had gone to 'clarify some things with family allies,' as they were now all 'faced with an ultimatum,' whatever that meant. Draco and his mother weren't sure when he'd be back, but just having learned Voldemort was responsible for his friend's death, Draco wanted his father to return as soon as possible.

OoOoO

Voldemort grinned from the seat of his throne. He felt invigorated, empowered, and, perhaps even . . . divinely endowed. He had *never* felt this powerful before, and he wanted more.

If one child could do this to him, what would another do? Another three, or five? And

what if they were more gifted and powerful than the Crabbe boy?

What if he had the child who had nearly taken it all from him all those years ago? Surely there would be no better sacrifice?

Oh, what magnificence! Perfection!

He would feel the rush of unparalleled energy and life surge into him again. A high above everything he had ever experienced, and what was more, when he had quenched his thirst. . . .

He would no doubt be a god among men.

Next part, *Contingency*, is under construction.

A/N: Long wait again, I know, sorry. Thanks again for all of the reviews and your patience. ^^

Scars

Questions/Fears Concerning:

Voldemort not going after children of other countries — Voldemort doesn't want to give any nation a reason to get involved. If he went after any of their children, they would no doubt get involved-which he does not want.

Will Severus reveal he's from the future? — I'm honestly not sure if I will have him come clean or not, though if he does, it will probably only be with Dumbledore and/or Harry.

Harry learning about the Prophecy — Just as in canon, Dumbledore believes Harry has enough on his mind (and he's right). And as for Severus, he won't reveal it to Harry unless he sees an actual need for it (as he would if another situation like canon-5th year occurred).

Part 31: Scars

Harry couldn't believe he was back in his dormitory bed at Hogwarts.

He hadn't gone to the funeral. It had been a private affair with only family and close family friends attending. And as much as he wished he could have gone, Harry wasn't sure how he would have felt if he had been invited.

The Flamel's did their best to keep his mind occupied, gently teaching him that life does go on, even though the life of individuals do not. It was a painful lesson; though, being an orphan, it wasn't a hard one to grasp. As promised, Nicholas started teaching him Alchemy, which was a bit different than potion making, as one actually got to use their wand. However, despite the distraction and his desire to learn the art, news concerning the Longbottoms shook his concentration and made his heart clench in worry.

Alice Longbottom had fallen into a coma not long after Dr. Price had finished his work (which he had carried out a few days after Harry had visited them), and Frank Longbottom seemed to have sunken deeper into his. Apparently, Dr. Price had expected something like this might happen, and had warned Augusta Longbottom as much, however, he seemed hopeful and said what they needed now was time. Harry hoped the doctor was right.

As for his parcelmagic, it was making slow but steady progress, and in fact he was

nearly done with the crucio-protection. He had learned, after meticulously working on placing the protection on himself, that the key was laying it in layers. He could not, like he could in the healing aspect of parselmagic, just blanket the area and call it good. There was substance to it, and to force it was frankly dangerous.

However, his newfound understanding of protective magic was not all of his doing. He had gotten help from, once again, Mr. Lee, who sent him two more ancient texts on it, and had also gained some insightful information from Mrs. Abelie Cagnina, who he had met at his Order of Merlin Award Ceremony. He kept them both informed of his progress and promised to continue.

However, he told no one of his other project concerning the protection against the killing curse.

Severus closed the door to his study. It had been a hard day, and he knew the rest of term would be just as hard, if not harder.

He turned around and faced his godson and his three dorm mates: Gregory Goyle, Blaise Zabini, and Theodore Nott.

Vince's murder was understandably still raw on everyone's minds, and his absence was only going to become more realized as they continued on without him. This was what had prompted the little meeting with his second year snakes. Something had to be done/decided about their dorm room, first and foremost.

Albus had offered to remove Vince's bed and completely rearrange the room before the students returned, as the constant reminder day in and day out would be trying for most any soul, but Severus had declined, at least for the moment.

To walk in a room you had called your temporary home for a year and a half and find it completely changed with no warning would be utterly jarring. So Severus chose to discuss what should be done with those who knew Vince best before deciding anything.

"I know it's late, but I felt it best we talk now rather than later," he began.

Draco and the others frankly looked like the last thing they wanted to do was talk. Severus couldn't blame them. He imagined all they had been doing since it happened was talk about it.

"Not about what's happened," Snape assured them, which caused them all to heave a sigh of relief. "But rather about your living arrangements."

At first, they all looked completely confused, but then realization dawned on them, though it was Draco who finally spoke.

"I think the others would agree with me that staying in the same dorm now would be . . . hard."

Greg and the other boys nodded sadly.

"But where else can we go?" Draco asked.

"The Headmaster has arranged for another dorm room to be made in case you wished to sleep elsewhere. It will be arranged differently from your old one, and will only have four beds, unless you wish to keep with the customary five," Severus gently explained.

Draco nodded. "I think we'll do that then. We have enough around us to act as a reminder of . . . what's happened."

Severus gave a quiet nod before leading them to their new dorm, which was still in the Slytherin Dormitory but a fair distance from their old one. With each step they took, they knew things were going to get harder before they got better.

O

The following days were surreal, and it took weeks to get used to no longer seeing Vince at Draco's right. It was harder than many thought it would be, but Gregory especially was having such a difficult time that it was beginning to show in his grades. Draco and the others tried to help, to at least keep him passing, but it was becoming increasingly arduous. In the end, Severus had to take Greg to the Headmaster's office to have a meeting with his parents.

While Greg was having academic problems, Harry was having occasional nightmares. Fortunately, the Flamels had helped him overcome the bulk of the emotional burden, but the rest he realized would have to diminish over time. It was, but slowly. However, Harry used it to his advantage, using it to drive him to improve his protective parselmagic and get ever closer to defeating the killing curse.

It was strange, somewhat. He had yet to share with anyone about his desire and plan of finding a way to block the killing curse. A part of him felt embarrassed for some reason. He couldn't quite explain why, even to himself, but he just felt better keeping it to himself. Until he made some real, tangible progress, he would keep what he was doing (or planning to do) to himself.

On another note, he had finished placing the crucio protection on himself and in his spare time was beginning to place it on Coral, Neville, Draco, and Greg. Often times he did this in the library while they were doing their homework. The moment he finished he would move beside one of them and begin quietly using parselmagic. Of course, it was a very slow process, but he was getting marginally faster with his application of the protection, though he had to stop sometimes to rest.

"Hello, Harry Potter."

Harry startled, turning around to find Luna Lovegood standing behind him. He had just left the library, leaving the others so he could get some air (be alone for a little while) before dinner. After Vince, they all occasionally desired alone time.

"Oh, hi. Luna, right?" Harry asked, not quite positive about her name, as the last time he had really spoken to her had been on the train after the summer holiday.

"You remember. Most people forget and call me Looney instead. I suppose it's an understandable mistake," she said simply.

Harry blinked, not really having the heart to tell her those people hadn't likely forgotten, but were actually being mean instead.

"They'll get better over time, you know," Luna said suddenly.

"Er . . . I'm sorry?" Harry asked, confused.

"Your nightmares. I had some for a while after I saw my mum die."

Harry's eyes widened. "I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say.

"Yes, it was rather horrible. I still feel very sad about it sometimes. She was quite an extraordinary witch, but she did like to experiment, and one day, one of her spells went badly wrong. I was nine."

"I can't imagine," Harry managed. Really, what is one supposed to say after hearing that? He didn't know, and neither did Coral.

"There are some things none of us can imagine until they happen to us, and there are some things that will never happen to us, so we will never fully understand how something feels."

"I suppose," Harry answered, now feeling as if he was in a daze.

"My nightmares lasted for a long time, and sometimes they would go all strange.

Things would happen in them that hadn't happened in real life. Like my father would be there and try to help, but it would make no difference or would make things worse. Then other times monsters would come or garden gnomes would. Has this happened to you?"

Harry rarely had the desire to lie, but in this instance it went beyond that. Here he had no desire to hide.

"A bit, though no gnomes."

Luna nodded thoughtfully. "You'll find out the truth," she said after a moment.

"What truth?" Harry asked, confused once again. Coral tilted her head in bemusement.

"You're right, you know. You were *just* a baby. Could you let me know the secret when you find it out?" Luna asked, apparently oblivious to Harry's bewilderment.

"Er, sure?" Harry asked, scratching his head. Coral was now hissing giggles.

"Thanks, Harry. I'll see you around then."

"Yeah. See you," he said as she turned and walked away.

:She's a bit odd: Coral said as they watched her disappear around a corner.

:Yes, very. I wonder what she meant by 'the truth':

Coral shrugged. :No idea:

O

Harry entered the Great Hall less than an hour later and quickly joined Neville at the Hufflepuff table; however, the place was not as calm and happy as it should have been.

"Professor McGonagall came and got them ten minutes ago," someone said.

"What's happened?" another asked.

"Something bad. I heard a prefect say something about it involving You-Know-Who."

Harry looked at Neville, raising an eyebrow.

"Professor McGonagall took some of her Gryffindors. The Weasleys I think."

"The red haired family?" Harry asked.

They were impossible to miss, after all, and the Weasley Twins were pretty popular where quidditch and pranking were concerned. Harry also knew of Ronald, sharing some classes and all.

Neville nodded and glanced up to the head table. Harry followed his gaze and found that Professor McGonagall wasn't there, though the Headmaster and the other professors were. However, they looked concerned and rather tense, which only made Harry and the other students wonder even more what had happened.

It was the next day they learned that the Weasleys' home, a place called 'The Burrow', had been completely destroyed by Voldemort and his death eaters. Fortunately, no one had been killed, but Mrs. Weasley had been burned by fiendfyre while her oldest son, William (Bill) Weasley, had lost his leg. They had been the only ones home at the time of the attack, and it was only thanks to Bill that they had managed to get out in time. He had apparated him and his mother away, though due to curses flying everywhere and the fiendfyre, he had failed to block a curse (which hit his knee) and splinched himself — leaving his leg behind.

Both Molly Weasley and her son were expected to survive, but not without permanent scars and damage.

The Weasley children returned to Hogwarts a week later, all of them quite subdued, even the twins. Harry wondered if he'd be able to help Mrs. Weasley, but then realized Fiendfyre was cursed fire. It was unlikely he'd be able to do anything even if he was asked to try.

And so it continued.

In the following month, the Bones' mansion was attacked; however, thanks to its ancient wards, the aurors had been able to arrive in time to prevent it from being obliterated like the Burrow had been. Madam Bones had fortunately escaped harm from the ruthless death eaters, but the arrival of the aurors hadn't been able to save the Bones' house elves or her devoted squib gardener.

At the same time the Bones' residence had been under assault, the Diggory's home had been as well. Mrs. Diggory witnessed the murder of her husband, Amos Diggory, by Bellatric Lestrange.

Susan Bones took some time away from school to visit her aunt, but returned a few

days later. Cedric Diggory was gone for much longer — helping his mother arrange the funeral as they both tried to cope with the horrible loss.

Weeks later, muggle-born families were targeted, including the Cresswells and Clearwaters. Coupled with those attacks, Voldemort himself carried out an attack on the home of Andromeda Tonks (formerly Black). All of the Tonks were home, and he found them. Although the Daily Prophet wasn't explicit with the details, the quotes they got from the aurors who found what was left was more than enough to give anyone with an imagination a gruesome picture. None of the Tonks had survived.

It was becoming an increasingly scary time to be alive, but like all times, happy moments in the midst of tragedy took place.

It was a week after the most recent attack when Harry was approached by the youngest male Weasley. They were in Herbology, but class had yet to start.

"Er, Potter?" Ron Weasley asked, approaching Harry and Neville.

Harry turned and faced him, a bit of dread rising in his chest. He was certain what this was going to be about.

"Yes?"

"Um, you're really good with healing, yeah?"

Harry couldn't help but lift an eyebrow at the rather pointless question. "A bit, I suppose. Why?"

"How good are you with, well . . . scars?" he asked, whispering toward the end, suddenly wishing he had been able to catch Harry in a more private place.

Harry frowned and gave a small sigh. "Is this about your mother?"

Ron bit his lip and gave a short nod. "I was hoping, maybe . . . you could, I don't know, try?"

"Weasley, she was hurt by cursed fire. I'm afraid I haven't figured out how to deal with –"

:Wait, Harry. Maybe we could try. Remember that conversation you had with the Headmaster about old and new scars?:

Harry went still and quiet, making Ron look at Coral and him hopefully. :I can't break down curse scars though:

:You've never tried removing them by going into the healthy flesh. You might be able to remove them if you sacrifice a bit of good tissue: Coral continued. :As gruesome as it is, perhaps you could lift them out:

Harry managed not to blanch at that mental picture, as it did have merit. Perhaps it would be a fair trade, though he wasn't sure how well he'd be able to fill in the void if he did manage to remove the cursed scar tissue. He supposed it would depend on how deep the scar went, and how much blood supply and magic he had to work with.

"If your mother would be willing to allow me to try, I might be able to do something. I can't promise you anything, but Coral has pointed out one possible route," Harry finally said, looking to Ron.

Ron broke into a huge grin. "Oh, thank you, Potter! I'll write to my mum right away!"

"Have her contact Madam Pomfrey. Maybe she could come here during a weekend?" Harry suggested, even as Ron bolted toward the exit, nearly bumping into a bemused Professor Sprout.

"I need to write to my mum, Professor; really important, please excuse me! Sorry!" Ron babbled before disappearing down the hall.

Sprout turned and looked at Harry who gave a soft smile and shrugged. Sprout was kind enough not to deduct points, though she did assign him an extra foot of homework to cover what he missed in class. Surprisingly, Ron didn't mind at all, though he did get a mild speaking to from the Granger girl afterward ('I understand why you left, but, really, you're lucky Professor Sprout is so nice. You could have gotten in big trouble!').

O o O

The weekend arrived, and it was an eager Ronald Weasley who led the way to the infirmary.

Entering the infirmary, Harry was suddenly very self-conscious, as the whole Weasley family was there, even the now one-legged Bill Weasley. However, his eyes quickly fell to the Weasley Matriarch and all his previous unease instantly evaporated.

She was in simple robes with colorfully knitted long sleeves. She had a scarf wrapped around her head, obscuring her face, and thin, worn gloves. She appeared

nervous, fidgeting with her hands as she did her best to only have the left side of her face visible to the room.

Madam Pomfrey was beside her and motioned Harry toward them as Mr. Weasley stepped up and offered his hand.

"Mr. Potter, thank you so much for doing this. We know it's not a guarantee, but we're still grateful you've agreed to try," he said as he shook Harry's hand.

Madam Pomfrey gave his shoulder a pat before taking over. "I believe it would be best if you all waited outside while Harry and I get to work," she said, looking to the Weasley children. "Arthur, you may stay if you wish, of course."

Arthur nodded and gave his wife's good hand a squeeze before he nodded to his children to wait outside. They left without complaint, which honestly surprised Harry a bit. Much of what he had heard about the Weasley's involved them being rowdy and disobedient. Granted, the Twins seemed to be the ones causing that image—save for this instance.

Now alone, Madam Pomfrey led Molly to a bed and had her lay down. Arthur moved to her good side, keeping her hand all the while.

"I'm going to remove the glamour now, as well as your scarf and your right sleeve," Pomfrey said gently.

Molly looked at Harry, and Harry was saddened by the shame he saw in her eyes. He offered her a small smile.

"Alright, Poppy," Molly whispered, causing Pomfrey to wave her wand.

Harry barely managed to keep his expression neutral as his eyes took in the damage the mother of seven had suffered. Coral tightened around his wrist.

She had been severely burned from the top of her right hand all the way up her arm to the side of her face. She was blind in her right eye, and her hair on that side of her head was gone. All along the devastated skin were hills and valleys of puckered scars, some angry red, while others were pale white. Her face was by far the worst. It was impossible to identify her simply by looking at her from that side. It was clear why Ron had acted the way he had, and to Harry the physical scaring was only half of Mrs. Weasley's injuries. Just by looking at her, he could tell her sense of self-worth was nearly nonexistent.

"I'm going to scan you now," Harry said, lifting his left hand and exposing Coral's

head before doing just what he said.

Harry did his best to keep all emotion from his face. The fiendfyre had certainly done damage. In certain areas the scar tissue reached into the muscle itself, while other places were shallow, only marring layers of skin. If he carried out his plan of practically scooping out the scar tissue, it was going to get very messy.

He continued up her arm, investigating the damage to the shoulder, then her neck and finally her face. There wasn't anything he could do for her eye (as far as he knew anyway), but with any luck he could help her be able to recognize herself in the mirror again with her good eye. As it stood now, the scaring was too heavy and thick to make out any familiar features on that side at all. He wasn't sure what he would be able to do with her ear, as it was little more than a clump of shriveled tissue, but hopefully Pomfrey would have an idea.

He lowered his hand and nodded to Pomfrey. "I can start on her arm today, but I think she should be asleep for it."

He felt a little awkward to be talking about his patient when she was right there, but she didn't seem to be capable of much discussion, so he glanced at Mr. Weasley.

"I think that would be best," Pomfrey agreed. "Are you willing to start today, Molly, Arthur?"

Arthur nodded. "If Mr. Potter is confident, we wish to start right away."

"Very good. Shall I go over what this will entail with the two of you?" Pomfrey asked. "I must admit what's involved is quite . . . invasive, but I believe it is the only way to reduce the visible damage."

"Please," Arthur said as Molly closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Pomfrey moved to Harry's side and trailed her finger across Molly's arm.

"Harry and I discussed this earlier this week, and we've decided it would be best for him to start with your arm. He will go in and lift as much of the scar tissue as he can by going along the good tissue. You will sacrifice a few millimeters of undamaged tissue for scar removal and hopefully re-growth of healthy skin and flesh."

"'Hopefully'?" Arthur asked.

"Because the damage was caused by magical means, we cannot be sure how deeply it has affected the body. At worst, a void will be left where any scar tissue was

removed, at best, new, unblemished skin will take its place. Harry will be working in small stages, so we will know right away if we can continue."

"Alright," Arthur said, giving his wife's hand a squeeze.

Pomfrey nodded and got the necessary potions and a narrow curtain to place over Molly.

"I want you to take these potions. Blood replenishing and Dreamless Sleep," Pomfrey said, handing them to Molly who drank the first immediately.

Before swigging down the second, she looked at Harry. "Thank you, dear, so much, for trying this — whatever you're able to do, I'm grateful."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, deciding that was the only thing he could say.

She fell asleep soon after and Madam Pomfrey maneuvered the curtain to completely block Arthur's view of Molly's arm.

"You may remain, and please, if she shows any signs of waking, calmly let us know immediately. Our main attention will be on her arm," Pomfrey said. "I also suggest you try not to look over the curtain. Once we begin, it will not be a very pleasant sight until we are finished."

Arthur tried not to show his worry at that and nodded, once again taking his sleeping wife's hand.

"Ready, Harry?"

Harry nodded and went forward, steeling himself for the unpleasant but necessary work ahead of him.

Pomfrey was silent as Harry started, holding out the dish for the discarded scar tissue. Only years of medic experience and dealing with the occasional bloody Quidditch injury would prevent her from running to the bathroom.

As for Harry, he convinced himself to ignore what was directly before him and focus on what was beneath.

Muttering parseltongue under his breath, he seeped his magic around and under the scar tissue, watching its progress in his mind's eye, he gathered it just a few millimeters below good tissue.

"I am about to remove this section," he said, tracing the air above Molly's hand to indicate the exact area.

"I'm ready, Harry, just let me know when to lift," she said, pointing her wand to cast a silent levitation charm at his signal.

He focused his magic while quietly whispering :cut, cut, cut:, gliding the magic forward like a blade and being mindful of nerves and arteries. If one was in the way, he took a bit of magic and pushed it aside before continuing on. It was slow work, but after fifteen minutes, he nodded to Pomfrey to lift the galleon sized bit. Moving quickly to take advantage of the blood flow, he pooled up a bit of Molly's magic and slowly began rebuilding the missing skin and flesh.

"It's working, Arthur. We just may be here a bit," Pomfrey assured.

"Take as long as you need," he said with a shaky breath.

They worked for well over two hours, and each time Harry took a bigger and bigger piece, lessoning the faint puzzle-piece-like scars that outlined the healed sections left behind. Despite the new, unavoidable scars, it was a vast improvement over the gnarled mess that it had been, and though the new skin was pinker than the skin on her other arm, from her hand to her shoulder, Molly had a nearly normal looking arm.

After covering the dish that she had used to collect the unwanted tissue and vanishing the blood, Pomfrey looked to Arthur.

"You may take a look. We are done with her arm," she said, sliding the curtain aside.

Hesitantly, he turned his eyes to his wife's arm. Almost immediately he began to weep tears of joy and wonder.

"You're truly a marvel, Mr. Potter. Every Healer we went to said she would have to learn to live with those scars," he said, tears still pooling in his eyes and trying to spill.

Harry self consciously rubbed his arm, at a loss of what to do or say.

"Mr. Potter has a knack for doing what's said to be impossible," Pomfrey said gently. "Now, if you wish, we can continue tomorrow morning. I'm sure Mr. Potter would say he is able to continue, but I would prefer to make sure he is adequately rested. It will also give me time to examine Molly before she learns of her progress."

"I agree," Arthur said, looking at his wife's currently ruined face.

"Would you like me to call in your family?" Pomfrey asked.

"After Molly wakes and we speak to her," he said softly.

"Very good," Pomfrey said, before waving her wand over Molly.

O o O

The next morning came and went quickly, and before too long the entire school had learned what Harry had managed to do.

Molly could now look in a mirror without dissolving into tears, even though her right eye would never see again. She, of course, could get an artificial one like Mad-eye Moody's, but she was content with simply charming it to look like any other eye. She had mild nerve damage in her arm, which was a result of the fiendfyre and not her treatment. As for her neck, Harry opted to do only minimal work there, as the amount of arteries and nerves created too much of a risk, no matter his skill in avoiding them. Molly was fine with that, especially since the scaring there was low. What she was truly grateful for was the renewal of her face, and though hair would never re-grow on that side of her head, that was easily remedied with a special wig or charm. As for her ear, Pomfrey worked a bit of her medical knowledge, along with a bit of skele-gro and Harry's abilities, and reshaped the ruined tissue into an ear again. It was a wonder to behold.

Understandably, Molly, not to mention the Weasleys in general, was ecstatic and beside herself with gratitude toward Harry. Poor Harry was a bit lost on what he should do about becoming an honorary Weasley.

Finally, he simply went with it, numbly receiving her hugs and the rest of the Weasleys'.

O

Weeks passed and, before the students wished, the time of final exams arrived. Worry about Voldemort and his Death Eaters remained, but life continued despite talk of spies existing within the Ministry and elsewhere. For the older generation, history seemed to be repeating itself, as once again trusting outsiders, acquaintances, and even friends was becoming difficult.

However, for the younger generation, they were uneasy but focused on less serious concerns. Other than tests, most of the older students were eagerly preparing for their last Hogsmeade Weekend — a reprieve from exams. Unfortunately, Harry and his friends were not yet old enough to enjoy that bit of recreation, and so settled on

visiting Hagrid. As for the professors, some were remaining at Hogwarts, while the rest would act as chaperones, including Professor Snape.

Severus glowered at the assembled students before him. It wasn't hard to see he didn't approve of this little outing and in fact believed it was rather foolish and risky. He understood the desire to not allow Voldemort, or any terrorist faction, dictate what the public could do, but there was being brave and there was being downright idiotic. The only plus side to all of this was that he was being allowed to set the ground rules for the eager little morons before him. Really, to go outside the protection of Hogwarts' wards after recent events? Were these kids brain dead or just plain suicidal? Unfortunately he had no say in whether Hogsmeade Weekend should be allowed or not, but he'd be a blubberworm before allowing any student to leave totally unprepared.

After outlining the generic rules of the little fieldtrip, Severus continued, his stance alone telling the students to keep still and silent.

"If anything does happen, such as Death Eaters attacking or the like, *fight **as** you **run***. Most Death Eaters are lazy. They go after the easy targets. Don't make yourself easy. Throwing even the simplest spells could buy you enough time to get away. Now, this does not give you permission to be what you may believe is 'brave'. 'Bravery' in this instance will more than likely be a death warrant," he said, making a few students gulp. "For help, run to one of the professors, including myself. We will tell you what to do and do our best to protect you."

With a few final words of wisdom, mainly escape routes, they set off, most looking forward to visiting the joke or candy shop despite Snape's little rant.

O

Heavy with rock-cakes in their pockets, Harry, Neville, Draco and Greg stepped out of Hagrid's hut and decided to make a detour before heading back to the castle.

Walking behind Hagrid's hut, they all stood silently as Neville visited Trevor's grave. Understandably, with the murder of Vince, death had new meaning for them.

"Alright, let's head back to the castle," Neville said quietly.

Harry and the others nodded and began walking. The night was cool and a calm breeze passed over them as the stars above twinkled. It was perfect.

Until a frosty wind cut across them and something seemed to blanket the sky in an unyielding darkness.

"Is this a storm?" Greg asked, confused as the air around them became even colder.

"I don't think so," Draco said as they slowed their pace and tried to understand what was happening.

"Lumos," Harry said, as the only light source for them after the sky had gone out was the castle and the puny little lamp by Hagrid's door far behind them.

Harry frowned, his face illuminated by his wand light. "Do you feel . . . something?"

"There!" Draco cried, pointing up.

They looked above just as a deep sense of anguish and loneliness seemed to swallow them up before they made out dark cloaks swarming the sky.

"Run!" Harry shouted as the mass of black, wispy sheets dived down.

Seconds later, loud crackling noises, much like fireworks, roared over them, and flashes of violent explosions rocked the sky. Ripples of an obscure surface covering the entirety of Hogwarts' grounds cascaded out from the assault, and old magic thrummed in the air.

"It's the wards!" Neville shouted.

"Run!" Hagrid suddenly boomed behind them, slamming his door open. "Hurry, ter the castle!"

He shouted some other things, but they were drowned out by the wards' defenses. Harry and the others ran, but an overwhelming feeling of despair made it nearly impossible to breathe. Neville stumbled, prompting Draco beside him to try to get him back on his feet as Harry gasped out, as if in pain, a few steps ahead.

Black shapes began plummeting around them, hitting the ground with a bizarre fizzing sound. Some flailed around, like fish out of water, while others were utterly still, as if dead.

Harry fell to his hands and knees as he felt something land on his back; however, it wasn't the physical weight that weighed heavily upon him, but something far more unbearable.

Fear surged within his heart, and the source went beyond that moment, for sure, any sensible person would be afraid of dark cloaked things falling from the sky and being told to run by a half giant. No . . . this fear was being caused by something far more

sinister. Something deep within his memory.

He no longer heard Hagrid's bellows among the wards' thundering booms, cracks and fizzles. He could no longer feel the grass beneath his hands or the hard ground under his knees. He was no longer even aware of the cloaked form draped limply over his back. His senses had turned inward, to the very last memory he had of his mother.

O

The only warning Severus had had was the first apparition crack, which was soon followed by a dozen more, and then *Voldemort's*.

The Dark Lord appeared in the middle of Hogsmeade, clearly relishing in the chaos that had suddenly erupted around him. Children were bolting toward the closest professors while the clueless Hogsmeade adults ran indoors in attempt to hide, most paying no mind to the children around them. Some even shoved the Hogwarts students aside. Severus sneered in disgust at the sight before brutally hexing a Death Eater as students made their way to him.

"Stay behind me!" he ordered, subtly backing them up between two buildings and out of most of the Death Eaters' lines of sight.

"As many as you can, my followers. Preferably third and fourth, if you please," Voldemort declared, haphazardly strolling down the street, fortunately away from Severus.

It only took the Potions Master one second to realize Voldemort was referring to 3rd and 4th year students and what that likely meant.

His thoughts instantly went to Vince before he did the first thing that popped into his mind.

"Mittens," he hissed, not about to draw unnecessary attention to himself, especially since his house elf would come whether he shouted or whispered.

-Pop-

"Yes, Master?" she squeaked, quickly realizing this was not a normal summons at all.

"Get as many Hogwarts elves as quick as you can to help you pop as many students possible back to Hogwarts, now! Voldemort wants the children!" he said, glancing

back at the five students huddled behind him.

Mittens needed no further instructions and popped behind him to then teleport the whole group back with her to Hogwarts. With those students safe, Severus turned his sights elsewhere.

The ominous skies over Hogwarts and the cold breeze told him dementors were likely attacking the school. He could only hope the improved wards they had added would be enough.

"Diffindo!" he shouted, refusing to cast the idiotic 'stupefy' in this moment. He could not afford any Death Eater 'ennervating' one of their fellows and having them rise up behind him.

He struck another Death Eater, who he believed was Mulciber, just as a sound that reminded him of Chinese firecrackers cut through the loud panic.

Dozens of house elves appeared beside every student in Hogsmeade before immediately vanishing with a practically unified -POP-.

Death Eaters were dumbfounded as Voldemort became *livid*. And it only got worse for him, as apparition cracks of Aurors and Order members rang out moments after.

O

Harry was suddenly aware of a strange heaviness in the air as his eyes focused on the woman in front of him.

Mum?

Between his crib bars, she looked extremely agitated and worried, but the static-like feeling around her was what truly concerned him. She had her wand out, and in a swift, determined movement, she jabbed the wand toward her heart and then flicked its end between her eyes. Harry could only watch as a bizarre magic filled the air that tossed the toys near her away and shook the furniture she had recently stacked against the door behind her, before she turned her wand on him. With a tenderness Harry never again experienced until he moved in with the Flamels, she took hold of his chin with her left hand to keep his face directed at her while she used the tip of her wand to gently trace the shape of a lightning bolt on his forehead. Harry felt another pulse of magic, but this time it spread across his skin before sinking in a second later.

With a gasp, Harry startled, still staring into his mother's eyes as she placed her

wand back into her sleeve, presumably into a holster.

What did she just do to him?

She gave him a soft smile as she lifted him up and whispered in his ear, "When this night is over, I will either be a squib or be dead, but you will continue to live. It's all I can give."

Realization immediately dawned on Harry before the bedroom door slammed open, the makeshift barricade collapsing to the side.

She dropped him back into the crib and twisted around to face Voldemort, shielding him from sight. Voldemort made an amused sound, and Harry could make out his black robes from around his mother's legs.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl . . . stand aside now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead—"

"This is my last warning—"

"Not Harry! Please . . . have mercy . . . have mercy. . . . Not Harry! Not Harry! Please —I'll do anything—"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

Voldemort's voice quickly became annoyed and impatient, and then, as if it was nothing, he uttered the killing curse.

Harry watched his mother drop, and it felt like an eternity before Voldemort stepped forward to stand over him. He stared up at his mother's murderer, now crying as he was faced with a wand pointing at his head for a second time that night.

Voldemort once again cast the life ending curse, but it was suddenly overwhelmed by something far stronger.

Magic Harry instinctively knew was his mother's rushed over him as, distantly, he heard what he could only surmise was Voldemort screaming out in unbelievable pain, but he did not care about that just then. An indescribable feeling of love and protection encompassed his entire being, all of it erupting from the fresh cut on his forehead as his entire room shook. He heard a huge crack and boom from the walls around him exploding out as his crib fell over with him still in it, but his mother's

magic continued rippling around him, shielding him from all debris.

Harry's vision began to fade, though he desperately did his best to memorize the scene before him.

His mother's crumpled body in front of the smoking form of Voldemort's corpse.

Next part, *Contingency* (for real this time), is under construction.

A/N: I'm sorry. It was another long wait. I also hope I didn't rush through things too much, but my muse refused to pace the plot any slower here-and any muse I got I was grateful for, so there you go. Anyway, concerning Markov, I'll get back to him later. The same goes with the Longbottoms and all the other things I didn't go into deeply here-simply because there wasn't a good opportunity to while I focused on Harry to move things along. Hopefully I didn't make things confusing by doing that.

Well, once again, thanks for all of the reviews and your patience. ^^

Contingency

Questions/Fears Concerning:

The Tonks — Yes, unfortunately Voldemort got them all, and by all, that includes Nymphadora too.

Length of Story — Funny that this was asked several times, as we're approaching the end now. I doubt there will be more than five parts after this. Actually, I'm pretty sure I'll be wrapping this up in about three.

Part 32: Contingency

Hagrid's heart was in this throat as he rushed forward as quickly as his legs could carry him. He could hardly see five feet in front of him now, and his lamp was flickering in and out. All he could do was advance to the place he had last seen them. Clamoring with his hands in front of him, but mindful of his strength in case he did find those he was desperately searching for, he made contact with a head full of hair. A gleam of silver told him it was Malfoy as he knelt down.

"Hagrid!" Greg yelled, alerting the half giant to his presence.

"Grab hold of me an' don't let go! Where's 'Arry?" Hagrid asked, his breath visible in the freezing air.

"Ahead of us. I saw him fall," Draco said, trying to lift Neville up. "*Lumos*!"

Now able to see enough to realize Neville was unconscious, Hagrid scooped him up like a baby and moved forward with Draco and Greg gripping the hem of his massive coat.

"Harry!" Draco shouted, holding out his lit wand as they approached.

There, sticking out from a black drape-like form were Harry's shoed feet.

Hagrid furiously kicked the shriveled dementor away like a diseased tarp and hurriedly turned Harry over while somehow balancing Neville in one arm.

"'Arry!" he said gruffly.

From his flickering lamp and Draco's lumos, they could see that Harry's lips were blue; however, the only thing that prevented them from caving into utter despair was

the clear sign of him breathing — faint puffs of fog were coming from his mouth in short gasps. Coral unwrapped herself from his wrist a bit and looked up grimly.

Hagrid only paused for a second before scooping Harry (and thus her) in his other arm, mirroring Neville's position.

Silently, they hurried forward, all of them wanting to get within the walls of Hogwarts before things got any worse. Dementors were still falling, but fortunately the wards had remained true and had, at the very least, immobilized them. A hand full of other students quickly joined their entourage, most of them second years.

"*Expecto Patronum*!" A huge wave of warm, comforting light shot toward them like a wave from the suddenly open front doors of the castle before forming a translucent, glowing wall a dozen feet behind them.

Flitwick's form stumbled from beyond the front doors, wand aloft as he maintained the spell. He waved them onward, the rest of his attention remaining on the bizarre shield.

They needed no further urging, and soon they were safe within the castle.

Flitwick cast some spells behind them before joining them.

"There's no other students out there, thank Merlin," he said, putting his wand away before he turned to the group shivering in the entrance hall, Hagrid in the center. "Alright, to those who can, go to your common rooms. The Headmaster has initiated lockdown. I'll have the castle's elves provide chocolate shortly. Hagrid, infirmary," he ordered.

Unaccustomed to the little man being so direct and serious, they obeyed without question, though Draco and Greg looked at their friends worriedly before Flitwick gave them a reassuring but firm nod of dismissal. They grudgingly left with the rest of the group.

Hagrid carried Harry and Neville all the way to the infirmary, following Flitwick down the corridors and toward the infirmary. Along the way, a house elf appeared beside the short professor, quick to keep up with his rapid pace as she listened to his whispered chocolate order before popping away. Soon after, they went through the doors of the hospital wing.

"It's dementors attacking the wards," Flitwick explained to Pomfrey as she quickly began waving her wand about as Hagrid laid Harry and Neville each in a bed. "I'm now especially grateful Severus suggested adding the defense against them. It

seems to completely incapacitate them, though their auras are still obviously present."

"Well, better that than them actively seeking souls," she stated.

"Quite right."

"Any others with severe reactions to the foul creatures?" she asked.

"No, but I have already arranged chocolate to be delivered to all the common rooms just the same."

"Good. Where's the Headmaster?" she asked.

"Suring up the wards," Flitwick stated. "He told me he doesn't think there's anything to worry about, but as this is the first time they've truly been tested. . . ."

"I understand," she said, glancing at Hagrid who was still standing worriedly in the middle of the infirmary behind Flitwick. "They'll be fine, Hagrid. I'm really not surprised these two have reacted this way, considering things. . . ."

She gave a sad sigh and Hagrid gave a gruff sniff.

"I got a patronus from Minerva moments before I left Albus. Hogsmeade is also under attack, but from death eaters."

Pomfrey gasped, immediately fearing the worst.

"Fortunately the students are already safe, thanks to Severus who apparently enlisted the help of our elves," Flitwick quickly assured with a wicked smile.

"That man never ceases to astound me. Hogwarts owes him more than I could ever express," she said sincerely.

Flitwick nodded in silent agreement.

"Well, if yuh need me, I'll be checkin' the halls. Make sure no students are wanderin'," Hagrid said after a moment.

"Thank you, Hagrid," Flitwick said. "I'll take the lower floors if you would take the upper?"

Hagrid nodded and they left Pomfrey to her work.

O

Dumbledore sipped his hot cocoa.

The Aurors had finished clearing out Hogsmeade and they were now going over the grounds of Hogwarts.

He smiled grimly. Happy they had had the wards in place, but saddened that they had been necessary. And the fact some of his students had experienced the horrors of the dementors, even incapacitated ones, weighed heavily on him. He was of course grateful no one had suffered permanent harm, and those exposed had been few, but it felt like a very faint silver lining in a violently thunderous sky.

Neville had woken about an hour after Albus had spoken with Madam Bones. The poor boy had been understandably disoriented and was at first convinced there were two people in extreme pain somewhere nearby. It was only after Pomfrey gently explained he had suffered his worst memory under the dementors that he stopped trying to convince them to search and fell utterly silent. Even though Dumbledore had not been there, he could picture Neville's face as if he had been, and it made the darker side of him wish everyone responsible for the sad condition of the lad's parents would be *kissed*.

As for Harry, his awakening was slightly worrying for a different reason.

He hadn't said a word when he first woke. He had been still, quiet, and, according to Pomfrey . . . blank.

He responded to Neville when he offered him some chocolate, which relieved Pomfrey, but he had yet to initiate any conversations. This only further cemented their assumption that Harry, like Neville, had experienced a memory many would say was best left forgotten.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, silently deciding he would give the boys some time before asking their Head of House to talk to them about what they had experienced if they remained so stoic.

O

It was dark and he was certain Neville had fallen asleep in the bed beside him, but he couldn't sleep. He had too much on his mind, least of which concerned what he had learned about the attack on Hogsmeade.

Harry hadn't told anyone about what the dementors had made him see, and it wasn't

because he was embarrassed about it or anything like that. It was because he was afraid of what effect that information would have on them. That and he was still uncertain of what he wanted to do with it.

There were two major things about the memory that had struck him. First, (and most obviously) was his mother's protection, but the second was the fact that Voldemort wanted **him,** *not his mother*. Why would a Dark Lord want to kill an infant so badly? It was utterly bizarre. However, there was little he could do about it. It wasn't as if he could go up to Voldemort and ask, 'Hey, why did you want to kill a baby who could barely hold a wand, let alone use one?'

He shook himself. Frankly, Voldemort's disturbing fascination with him didn't seem all that important. It was what it was. Yeah, it was troubling, but he decided in this instance it was best to do what Professor Snape did and try not to understand the minds of Dark Lords.

As for his mother's protection, that was where his indecision lay.

Oh, there was no question that he would use the information, he was just unsure about what exactly he should do with itand *who* he should involve.

Part of him wanted to tell everyone he knew he could trust, like: Professor Snape, the Headmaster, his Head of House, Madam Pomfrey, Neville, and his guardians.

However, he wasn't stupid. He knew this information was dangerous. Not only because of what Voldemort might try to do if he discovered it, but what the very act of this 'self-sacrifice' did to his mother and Voldemort. If someone were to try to do what his mother had, only adjust it in hopes of doing exactly what he himself was hoping to do (reflect the curse but remain alive), but fail. . . .

He knew what his mother's protection had done to the bedroom, and it had only been her magic that had saved him from all harm (save the lightning mark). He could only imagine how explosive it would be if the protection went absolutely wrong.

Which led him to the other side of his internal argument.

He didn't want to tell *anyone*. He wanted to keep this a secret (save from Coral of course), for the simple likelihood of people wanting to stop him from delving into this mysterious and no doubt hazardous magic.

Sure, he knew they would be well-meaning, and the slightly sensible part of him agreed with them, but the fact remained that he had knowledge that could stop the war, and he didn't want anyone to tell him he should let the adults handle it or

whatnot. Experience alone had shown him he was part of this war whether he liked it or not—for crying out loud Voldemort himself had gone after him for some inconceivable reason before he could even properly talk! He should take an active role in this war, not attempt to 'remain' at the sidelines.

Perhaps he was being childish, but he couldn't help but feel possessive of this knowledge. His mother had given it to him, in a way at least, so, in his mind, it was his to do with as he felt best. It was his job to make sure it didn't fall into the wrong hands and was used as it should be — to save innocents.

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

It was decided then. He would do this on his own, at least for now. If he felt he was getting in over his head he'd go to his guardians or to Snape, otherwise, he would discover how his mother had done what she had and, perhaps, with her words of, '*When this night is over, I will either be a squib or be dead*', find a way to initiate the protection but survive. Perhaps with it he would truly end the war, just as she almost had.

Harry swallowed.

This was no small undertaking. He knew that. And he knew he would only get one chance to attempt this protection (assuming he ever figured it out and was given the unfortunate/'lucky' opportunity).

Well, what he needed to do next was learn more about sacrificial magic, but not only 'sacrificial', but **self**-sacrificial.

It was ironic in a way. Here he was, trying to figure out how to go about committing self-sacrifice while Voldemort was out there hunting for more sacrifices.

Harry's jaw clenched, his thoughts turning to Vincent.

"For you, Vince," he whispered, before rolling over to finally sleep.

O

Voldemort had been livid. He had been on the verge of a total and complete meltdown – until he remembered he had a backup plan. There was an easy solution, though not preferable, it would do.

Any child under the age of fifteen would suffice. It was all about the mold-ability of the sacrifice's magic, after all. They had to be old enough to have at least a minute

control over their magic (eleven), but young enough for their magic to not have begun entering 'majority'.

Well, the only thing to do now was to wait until the time was right to gather up his followers and get them to assemble their families — of course he wouldn't be giving the true reason for his request (order), but that mattered not. It also helped that no one knew the full story behind the Crabbe boy's death, despite how thorough Bones' blasted investigation had been. . . .*

He'd get stronger, become invincible, and then . . . well, then no one would be able to stand in his way.

Not the Ministry.

Not Dumbledore.

Not bloody, traitorous Severus.

And definitely not the Potter brat.

He would have the Wizarding World.

O

Harry took a deep breath to calm down as he forced himself to accept what he was doing. There was no going back now. Well, there was, but he wasn't going to. He had to do this.

"Thanks, Dobby," he whispered as he removed his invisibility cloak.

"Dobby is happy to serve master," Dobby said reverently, stepping back and hurrying down to the edge of the aisle to keep a look out.

They were in the Restricted Section of the library.

It hadn't taken long for Harry to realize the only way he'd find anything about sacrificial magic was through unconventional and less than permitted methods. Fortunately, he had Neville to cover for him in the dorm room (granted, it was 1am and he didn't anticipate any of their dorm mates waking up and noticing his absence), along with his invisibility cloak and Dobby. After some thought (as well as some brief words with Coral), Harry told Neville of his memory and together they agreed it best to keep it a secret for the moment.

The days following the failed dementor attack had passed in a blur, which had been

both a blessing and a curse. He had spoken with Professor Sprout briefly about his experience with the dementors, just enough to relieve any worry she clearly had for him, and, though at the time he wanted to avoid talking about it all together, in the end Harry supposed it helped him. But more than that, it had solidified the decision he had made to keep his hunt for the secret of his mother's success hush-hush.

As much as he basked in the care and love of his Head of House, it was abundantly clear that she (and the other adults he looked up to) would try to stop his progress for the simple fact that it was extremely dangerous. His mother had succeeded where no one had before, but in doing so she given up her life — granted, some would argue it was gone the moment Voldemort entered their house. However, no matter how one looked at it, in seeking the secret to it and taking it a step further . . . Harry was risking his very life, because, ultimately, he wanted to use this protection and would if given the opportunity. He wasn't suicidal, but knowing he had the key that could possibly permanently end the war and save the life of another spurred him on like nothing else could — the image of Vince and his family at the forefront.

Neville, though a little wary about the mysterious magic Harry had seen his mother use, agreed with Harry's goal, saying if anyone could find the secret and go beyond it, it would be Harry. Harry was also certain the pain Neville had heard his parents endure from his own memory only fueled his desire to help Harry end the war — however that could be accomplished.

And so, there he was, searching the shelves, hoping to find at least one book that would shed some more light on sacrificial magic as well as self-sacrifice.

It was approaching 2:30am and after flipping through dozens of dark (and more than disturbing) books with the help of Dobby, he finally came upon a chapter called 'Honorable Death' that just might help. It was from a book entitled 'Ancient Family Rites, Forbidden and Forgotten.'

Although the chapter title itself was a bit off-putting, Harry soon found its contents far lighter than some of the other bits he had read from other books — like the merciless rituals in 'Blood Sacrifice, Ultimate Power' and the barbaric methods in 'Young Forever'.

With Dobby now keeping watch again, Harry read.

In the centuries of the ruthless Family Rivalries and Bloodline Feuds, it was common practice for an ailing family elder to endow one of their heirs with their magic as a last act of love upon their family and their children's future offspring. This was in part due to the conflict of bloodline strength between families. An elder imparting their

magic to an heir would ensure certain magical gifts would be passed on in the bloodline — such as being an: Animagus, Metamorphmagus, Parselmouth, Seer, Occlumens, Legilimens, Polyglot, Sorcerer, Warlock, or Mage. An heir already with an ability became stronger for a time after being empowered by an elder, but this affect was only temporary; however, their own children were more likely to inherit the ability down the line.

The other reason was for far more serious matters. Family rivalries were particularly vicious and the high mortality rate between fighting families sometimes drove bloodlines to extinction. Heirs, particularly future family heads, were often targeted with extremely gruesome curses and poisons. This, above all other concerns, was what drove many elders into embracing 'Honorable Death', banking on their final act to lessen or outright prevent such perils for one of their loved ones — at least temporarily.

To receive such a gift was a great honor and to carry out the act itself was believed to be the greatest act anyone could ever do. For many families, future generations were sworn to remember any such elders and honor them, imparting a degree of 'eternal life' to the deceased elder through remembrance.

This Family Rite is a ritual of self-sacrifice, which many in the modern age consider dark magic, but most will concede it was a necessary evil in those times.

Harry paused, his heart hammering in his chest. This had to be it, or at least it was where his mother might have gotten the idea for what she had done. He turned his eyes back to the page, skimming a bit before coming to more informative paragraphs.

Some today may view this practice as ritualistic suicide; however, unlike suicide, which is arguably done out of hopelessness and purposeless surrender, this is done out of unwavering devotion and hope in the next generation. Purpose and intent is what drives this ritual, and though a selected family member would end the life of the willing elder, it was the elder's will and rune marker that ensured proper transfer. An elder crafted his/her magic in their final moments to carry out a specific desire — whether that be purely magic/ability enhancement, part protection and bloodline reinforcement, or maximum guard against harm. Understandably, the current environment of the family would dictate much of what an elder's objective would be.

Whatever was chosen, the gift was only temporary, but often times it lasted long enough for the heir to grow into adulthood and become strong enough to watch over themselves and their own — the heart of the reason why this Rite was born and existed for so long.

Harry turned the page, hoping for more information, mainly about what this 'rune marker' was exactly, but was disappointed when he was given a list of people who had had an 'Honorable Death' and which heir they had chosen.

This list went on for several pages, many full of names he had never heard of, but then a few last names he recognized began to surface.

1538 Carina Aquila Black - Cetus Pavo Black

1573 Egbert Flint - Tuberous Flint

1623 Violetta Longbottom - Cassiopeia Longbottom

1689 Charlus Black - Nigellus Black

1745 Sibelius Potter - Gerald Potter

1841 Wulfric Albus Dumbledore - Percival Sandoz Dumbledore

The names didn't continue beyond 1875, which made Harry recall what he had learned about the Legacy Spell from the Sorting Hat. The purpose of the Legacy Spell at that time was to gauge the magical abilities of a child and see if they were worthy of the family. Of course, it had not always been that way, but these family rivalries had clearly brought out the worst in too many people — granted, those times also brought about this ultimate act of family devotion and love — though Harry wondered if it could have morphed into a perverse sort of duty and pride, or an escape from the fear of becoming painfully feeble in years.

Coming to the last page of the chapter, Harry continued to read, never minding how late (or early) it was becoming.

Through the centuries of use, this Rite has failed a number of times, backfiring horribly on those present and destroying the body of the elder. At first it was believed to have failed because the one receiving the gift wasn't worthy or that the rune marker was inadequate, but later, upon interviewing ghosts of failed Rite elders, it was discovered that any selfish motives from the elder would cause the backlash. This included expectations of the family forever honoring their name or other such delusions of eternal grandeur, as well as dreams of their chosen heir becoming strong for the sole reason to completely destroy their rivals.

Harry nodded to himself. That made sense. For true self-sacrifice, any greed or the like would conflict with it and cause it to fail.

With a start, Harry suddenly realized there was sunlight from the window hitting the book and he hurriedly put it away. He needed to get back to his bed immediately!

"Dobby," Harry whispered urgently.

Instantly, Dobby was there and before Harry knew it, they were on his bed, its curtains still wrapped tightly around. He could hear a few snores and that comforted him.

His mission had been a success. Now he needed to look into this 'rune marker'.

O

Augusta couldn't help but feel strange in not heading to a particular room on the fourth floor as she had done in almost every previous visit before her son and daughter-in-law had been moved into the muggle hospital.

Carrying a thick folder, she headed to the office of the head of the Janus Thickey Ward to drop off the most recent information on Frank and Alice's conditions.

She hid a soft smile.

According to Dr. Price, things were improving on all fronts. According to their last MRIs, their minds were on the mend and from some machine called an 'EEG', Price said they were responding to outside stimuli even though they were both in a coma. This, he assured her, was an extremely good sign, and what was even better was that the readings were slowly getting stronger and more stable. He was confident they would wake in the near future and actually said they could wake them up now, but that it was best to wait for them to heal as much as they could before doing so. If they found their progress had plateau-ed and they were still not waking on their own, then they would step in. Augusta agreed when shown their before-and-after EEG readings and MRI images. The differences between them were obvious even to someone like her.

She was hopeful they would wake when Neville came home later that week. With everything that had been happening in the world, something good was desperately needed.

Her thoughts went to that poor boy she knew had been part of Neville's circle of friends.

She of course had never really associated with the Crabbe family. They had been too dark for her liking, even if she excluded the fact Markov was or used to be a

death eater. But no child deserved to die, least of all like that, and as much as she loathed any death eater, she knew what it was like to grieve the loss – or perceived loss — of a son. And Markov was grieving, and it had driven him beyond the brink of insanity.

He was on the fourth floor now, down the hall from where Frank and Alice had stayed. From what little she had managed to overhear from healers tending to him, the man was a blubbering mess — which was understandable. And, according to one blabby medi-witch, they had found evidence of him being under the Imperious — which had been so strong it had actually left damage on his mind. He had very few moments of lucidness and rocked in eerie silence most of the time. It was very obvious, at least to her, that the man was suffering from more than just immense grief, but guilt as well. She could hardly imagine. Imperioed to do whatever he had done (as the exact circumstances of his family's murder was still unknown to the public), all the while aware of his actions. . . . It was enough to make her pity even him.

It was morbidly ironic, and she was disgusted with herself for even thinking it, but she thought it anyway. At the end of the last war, Markov had escaped Azkaban by lying and saying he had been imperioed. Well, this time it was actually the truth.

O

Harry was on his way back to the dorms after the final feast. Neville had opted to pack beforehand, so chose to stay for more dessert. Harry on the other hand needed to pack to be ready for the next morning when they left for the summer.

"Hello, Harry Potter."

Harry nearly leapt out of his skin.

:Really, does she just materialize out of thin air?: Coral hissed quietly.

"Hi, Luna," Harry managed, calming himself.

"Have you found the secret?" she asked, for the first time actually looking interested instead of dazed.

"Er. . . ." Harry looked around them and found they were alone, at least for the moment. "Maybe. I'm still trying to find out a few things, but I've made progress."

Harry didn't see a reason to lie, at least to her. Who was she going to tell, and who would believe her? Sort of a mean thought, but it was true. Besides, he liked Luna.

He wasn't sure why, but there was something about her.

"Like what?"

"Well, I learned it's tied to something called a 'rune marker'." He decided he didn't need to specify what 'it' was. Luna seemed to be following without him explicitly saying 'the protection against the killing curse'.

Her eyebrows went up a tiny bit and her eyes glanced very briefly at his scar — the first time he could ever recall her looking at it.

"That makes sense. You might want to read 'Etchings of the Elders'. Very informative."

Harry slowly nodded, devoting the title to his memory. "Thanks, I will."

"Unfortunately, it's not in Hogwarts' library. I've looked. But if you want, I can ask my father if he could let you borrow his copy this summer?"

"That would be great, Luna, thanks," Harry said with a smile. "What is the book about exactly?"

"Old rune writings and Stone Pixies," she answered simply.

"Stone Pixies?" Harry asked, now a little confused.

"Well, runes had to come from somewhere, right?" she returned seriously.

Harry blinked before Luna gave a firm happy nod and skipped off.

:Well, that was interesting: Coral muttered.

Harry silently agreed.

O

Voldemort hid a grin as all of his death eaters assembled before him.

Soon he would experience the rush of pure power and become invincible, but first, to set his plan in motion.

They were in a clearing within a forest of no importance (other than it holding this meeting and being the site he had chosen to soon do the next sacrifice — preferably sacrifices).

He went forward, his dark robes trailing lightly behind him as he turned his eyes to Lucius and Trent Goyle. He didn't fail to see how their eyes became nervous. Good, they should always fear and tremble before him.

"Your sons are friends with Potter, I understand?" he asked.

It wasn't really a question, but they nodded anyway.

"Good. Go and bring them to me. I wish to ask them some questions myself. Perhaps their answers will paint the way to Potter's guardians. I have grown tired of waiting for my spies, particularly within the Adoption Board. Potter's luck will soon run out, and so will the number of his protectors."

Voldemort let his smile show this time as he met Lucius' eyes. . . .

Something in them took Voldemort aback. Something had changed. Something was different. Alarmingly different.

It all came to him in a fraction of a second as he peered into the blond aristocrat's soul.

Lucius didn't believe him.

Lucius *knew* he was lying. . . .

He looked deeper.

Voldemort was not surprised by the fear in Lucius, immense and thick, but oddly this fear was not for himself. There was strength, or at least an unwavering intent to do something — or rather, prevent *him* from doing something.

And there it was.

Like a slap to the face that would leave one's skin stinging long after being struck, Voldemort found a serious problem.

Somehow, Lucius knew. . . .

And it was abundantly clear Lucius would not be retrieving Draco for him.

Voldemort saw red.

O

Lucius knew he had been discovered even before Voldemort's eyes darkened, and just as Voldemort began to move, Lucius side-stepped, hoping his contingency plan would hold true.

Pulling out his wand and barely managing to roll out of the path of Voldemort's killing curse, Lucius fired his own at the closest death eater he had not allied with weeks before. . . .

And then, just as he had desperately hoped, Goyle, Nott, and Flint acted — each relentlessly attacking the most loyal death eaters near as chaos instantly ensued.

Muttering a word that would trigger a message to be sent to Narcissa (made possible by Severus' ingenious spellwork), Lucius tossed another spell, this one hitting Peter Pettigrew in the face. The rat would not be getting up.

Lucius didn't bother to count as body after body fell, most barely having managed to pull out their wands in attempt to defend themselves as he fled Voldemort's wrath. He felt spells shooting past his shoulders while others narrowly missed his legs. He leapt over a dead werewolf (courtesy of Nott) and dived over a fallen tree.

The old wood exploded, but he didn't dare look back as he vaulted himself behind another tree, this one still standing, as he activated his port-key, confident he was beyond the wards Voldemort now always erected. As the yank of the port-key took him, he hoped his co-conspirators had or would make it out as well.

O

"Draco, take hold of this. We are leaving," his mother said flatly, thrusting a pack into his arms moments after slamming his bedroom door open and entering without so much as a knock.

He had never seen his mother like this. Her eyes held a panic that he had never seen in another human being, and it frightened him. Understandably at a loss, Draco took hold of the bag as she took hold of his shoulder.

"Mum, wha—" he started, only to feel a rather violent pull of a port-key.

He was suddenly aware of dim candlelight and the sound of water dripping, however, his mother's turbulent breathing was what had most of his attention. He turned around in her arms and looked up into her face.

A bizarre mixture of relief and worry was what he found, and he suddenly understood.

They had carried out the contingency plan his godfather had planned out with his father. Something had happened, and they had felt it necessary to have his mother take him and leave.

Were they even in England anymore? He wondered, but suddenly his thoughts turned elsewhere.

"Where's father?" he asked.

His mother took a slow, shaky breath, but when she finally spoke, her voice was steady. "He should be with Severus now or very soon. We'll know in a few minutes," she said, looking down at the bag she had given him.

Draco handed it back to her and she immediately opened it and retrieved a mirror.

"Where are we?" he asked after a long moment, deciding that was the next most pressing question.

She didn't look up from the mirror, but she answered. "Gannat, France."

After it was clear he would not be told anything else for the moment, Draco looked around and moved to sit on a chair near a nearly bare bookcase. The place was very old and reminded him more of a dungeon than anything else, though fortunately there were no torture devices. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and prayed his father and godfather were safe.

All the while, his mother continued to stare into the mirror, waiting.

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*Voldemort is not aware of Bellatrix letting Narcissa in on the little secret (the whole story of the Crabbes' murder). All Voldemort knows is that the public somehow learned that death eaters had been involved and that Markov did not murder his family.

Next part, *Coming to a Head,* is under construction.

A/N: Well, the wait at least wasn't as long as last time :P Thanks for all of the reviews and your patience. ^^

Side-note: To those who may be interested, I've published a short story called 'Abraham' available through the Kindle Store on Amazon. You can find the link to it on my profile. I hope you'll check it out :)

Coming to a Head

Questions/Fears Concerning:

A Sequel — No, there won't be a sequel. Sorry.

Part 33: Coming to a Head

Severus knew the plan had been initiated the moment his watch gave the faint tremor. He immediately headed to his quarters to wait for Lucius to arrive through the floo. If all went according to plan, Lucius would port-key to an alley in muggle-London before making his way to a magically hidden apartment from the back (available only to those keyed into the wards). From there, he would use the fireplace within to floo to Hogwarts (which was itself heavily warded and specifically keyed — Severus had to 'unlock' it from his end to make it accessible for Lucius).

And so he waited. And waited.

Dread began to fill him just before the fireplace roared to life.

Lucius tumbled out, singed and out of breath. But alive.

Severus hurried to his side and quickly scanned for any curses or undesirable magic. He found nothing, fortunately, so guided Lucius to the nearest chair before summoning a mirror on the side table.

"He's safe. Give us a moment," Severus whispered onto the surface of the mirror before setting it aside and looking at Lucius whose pounding heart was finally beginning to settle.

"He somehow knew I knew. He looked into my eyes and just . . . I don't know. It wasn't quite Legilimency, but it was similar. I can't really explain it and it doesn't matter. I knew when he saw the truth, and I acted, as we discussed. The others immediately followed me. I think they realized what was going on as soon as I did when he tried to have Trent and me bring our sons to him to be questioned about Potter's guardians. What a pitiful ruse," Lucius sneered before he shook his head and raised the tip of his wand to his temple. "Here's the memory. I think it'll be clearer than my words."

Severus placed the memory in a vial to watch later as he glanced to the other mirrors on the fireplace. Hopefully, with any luck, they would all activate soon and

would deliver good news. Until then, he needed to inform Dumbledore what had happened and view the memory.

"The mirror to your family is beside you. The mirrors to the others are here," he said, indicating the fireplace as he headed toward the door. "Be ready to answer. Hopefully we'll have news about all of them shortly."

Lucius nodded, gratefully lifting the mirror for him.

"Narcissa," he began.

Severus didn't hear much more as he flooed to the Headmaster's office.

OoOoO

Madam Bones leaned back in her office chair, barely able to believe what Albus Dumbledore had just shown her.

Together, they had leapt into his pensieve he had brought and had witnessed the unbelievable.

Death Eaters (alleged or not) turning against Voldemort — Lucius Malfoy, Trent Goyle, Darol Nott, and Sal Flint.

Sure, there had only been four of them, but that had been enough.

In the large gathering, Lucius initiated the insane battle with a killing curse at the closest Death Eater Madam Bones was sure had been Gibbon. From there, blasting hexes from Flint and Goyle sent over a dozen Death Eaters near flying into the trees, most horrendously striking the unforgiving trunks.

And then there was Nott.

As Pettigrew fell with a bone shattering hex to the face, Nott was dueling (destroying) those around him with fiendfyre. Bones wasn't sure of them all, but knew Dolohov, Barty Crouch Jr., Jugson, and the Lestrange Brothers had been within the inferno.

Meanwhile, Lucius blasted Macnair off his feet as he dodged spells from Voldemort who seemed oblivious to the death around him, choosing to focus only on Malfoy.

That was all the memory revealed before Lucius made it behind a tree and port-keyed away, ending the memory. However, Dumbledore proved, once again, how well informed he was.

Trent Goyle and Sal Flint had both gotten away and were now in hiding with their families. Darol Nott, however, had suffered a grievous injury and was in a secret location being tended to by some trusted healers Dumbledore knew. His son, Theodore Nott, was with him, but it wasn't yet known if he would survive.

As one can imagine, Bellatrix had not been happy with him killing her husband and brother-in-law.

Madam Bones shook her head.

Despite knowing their pasts and their methods, she couldn't help feel a little grateful to Lucius and the three who sided with him. Because of their actions, Voldemort's following had been severely diminished — Bones would even say demolished.

She could only hope the war would now end sooner rather than later, and now with the improved security within the Ministry (such as the wards and alarm system), things were looking up.

OoOoO

Harry had been home a week (home — such a wonderful word), busy reading the book Luna had sent just a few days after Nicholas and Perenelle had picked him up just outside 9 ¾ (in disguise). For Harry, things had started out calm and rather happy, until that Monday.

Near the end of the day, his scar surged with a furious rage that rivaled anything he had ever felt from Voldemort, and that was saying something. He didn't see anything (partly due to his slowly improving shields and Nicholas' mental moat), but what did come across loud and clear was that someone (or a group of someones) was in serious trouble. Voldemort's desire to torture and destroy who had just angered him was undeniable.

Fortunately, it only took a few hours to learn the reason for Voldemort's apparent mood swing, which brought both relief and worry.

He was glad Lucius and the other men had escaped and that their families were now safe in hiding, but, at the same time, he couldn't help but think that his parents had hid from Voldemort and that hadn't turned out all that well, had it?

However, there wasn't anything he could do to help keep them safe directly, and he also knew Professor Snape and the others were doing everything they could to thwart Voldemort. It was some comfort to him as he refocused on his research

(doing his best to ignore the constant dull throb in his scar).

He wasn't surprised to find much of 'Etchings of the Elders' well over his head in classic Luna-bizarreness, but some of it was actually quite helpful and rather enlightening.

His lightning bolt scar was actually a rune, a rune called 'Sig'. It symbolized victory and could also be used to represent a triumph of day over night, or good over evil. There were other meanings, but they all ultimately led him to the same thing. His mother had likely selected this rune because she believed it would provide her magic with the strongest focus and purpose. And it had worked. He had lived, and Voldemort had been temporarily defeated.

Now if only he could find out what she had meant when she had said 'I will either be a squib or be dead.'

Well, he still had much of the summer to continue his research and he had not hit a wall that would cause him to seek help from the Flamels or even Professor Snape yet. Which reminded him, he would need to place the Cruciatus protection on his guardians some time before he went back to school.

But back to his research, another thing he had read from the book was that (like the book on Ancient Rites at Hogwarts) intent was the key to using and activating runes. Words and gestures could help focus it, as well as one's wand, but when one got down to the essential component, it was all about one's will and desire.

It certainly made sense to Harry. It was why his mother had used her wand when she pointed to her heart and 'third eye' before tracing the rune on his head. It also explained why he had not heard any 'magic words'. It had all been internal, a silent plea, an unyielding purpose that guided her magic to cloak Harry in the unmatchable shield.

It was understandably more than enough to give Harry a deeper sense of pride for his mother — gaining further understanding of the depth of her strength and love — but it also solidified the solemn longing to have known her.

He wondered if he would be able to ever give as much as she had.

He hoped he was at least capable.

OoOoO

"Neville. Neville! Wake up, get dressed!" his Gran called from the doorway, the light

from the hall pouring in. "Dr. Price just floo called."

Neville, already clamoring out of bed, stumbled upon hearing that and caught himself on his dresser. He turned and looked at his grandmother, a million questions in his eyes.

"It's your mother. She's asking for you." Her voice quavered, but in a good way before she turned and continued down the hall.

Neville had never gotten dressed so quickly in his life, though he almost put his shoes on the wrong feet because of his rush.

In what felt like barely a blink in time, he was beside Augusta, ready to apparate to the hospital.

For the past several days, they had visited the hospital every day, hoping his presence and voice would help his parents wake. But day after day, they both remained stubbornly in their healing sleep.

Until now.

Neville all but ran to his parents' room, and it was only thanks to the very early hour that he didn't plow into anyone on his way to the partly open door. Coming to a sudden stop at the threshold, Dr. Price and his grandmother behind him, he was faced with the last thing he ever believed would be possible.

His mother was seated in a wheelchair beside his father's bed holding his limp hand.

He just stood there, mesmerized, until she turned and faced him, somehow sensing his presence.

Tears erupted and he quickly found himself in his mother's arms, both too overjoyed to care about anything else.

Neville had his mother back.

OoOoO

Harry was ecstatic for Neville, and though he wanted to see Alice Longbottom for himself, he understood it was currently time for family only, especially since Frank Longbottom woke two days after Alice.

From the letter he had received from Neville and what he had been told by his guardians (who had been updated by Dumbledore), Alice and Frank had started

physical therapy to help them regain whatever function they could after the severe nerve damage and lack of use. Understandably, Alice was doing better than Frank, but it was hoped that Frank would be able to stand, perhaps even walk, by the end of the year.

Unfortunately, the physical was not the only problem Frank currently faced, or the worst. He could barely speak, and the few words he could vocalize came out slurred and broken. For this reason, he was also seeing a speech therapist on top of his daily regimen of stretches and short bouts of physical training. Memory was also an issue, for both of them, but much more so for Frank. From what little he could communicate, they guessed he only remembered snippets from his life, which, according to Dr. Price, was more than they could have realistically hoped for at this stage, given the depth and layers of his damage. However, despite that bit of solace, it was difficult for the Longbottoms.

At times, Frank would look at them in confusion when they would refer to something, like the squid within Hogwarts' Black Lake or Alice's favorite food. And other more simple things, like colors and shapes, it was as if he had to fight to remember or concentrate to relearn them.

All of this, Dr. Price said, was to be expected, but the important thing, as Alice pointed out along with Price, was that they were both better off than they were a year ago and still improving.

Harry liked Alice already.

"Good morning, Harry. Have you gotten another letter from Neville?" Nicholas asked, entering the kitchen.

"Yeah. His parents are doing better every day. He's going to ask Dr. Price if I can visit them next week."

Nicholas smiled as he poured himself some tea and sat beside his wife who had just finished making a late brunch for them. "I'm sure that'll be allowed."

Harry gave an uncertain nod. Neville had confided in him that Dr. Price didn't want to force Frank to meet more new faces than he already had to. Things were hard enough as it was for him.

"Well, anything else interesting come in?" Nicholas asked.

Harry turned to the rest of the mail, which he had set aside on the table, temporarily forgetting it when he saw Neville's handwriting. Pushing aside a letter to Perenelle,

his eyes widened at the post beneath.

LONGBOTTOMS AWAKE AND IN CARE OF MUGGLES!

The huge title lay across the front cover of the Daily Prophet with an image of two empty beds Harry recognized as belonging to St. Mungos just below it.

"What's wrong?" Perenelle asked, seeing his face.

"How did they find out?" Harry asked aloud, putting the paper down.

Nicholas slid the paper to himself and began to skim it.

"I'm actually surprised an article hasn't been written about them sooner. They have been absent from St. Mungos for months now. I would have thought someone would have asked about that fact soon after they had been moved to the muggle hospital," Nicholas admitted. "But this is . . . ."

He suddenly glared down at the page.

"Now this is outrageous! They definitely crossed the line here. There's no way they came by that information legally, especially after how hard Augusta has been keeping things private," he said as his wife leaned over to take a look.

"Well, it's no wonder. That venomous witch is the writer of this — that *Rita Skeeter*," Perenelle hissed before releasing a furious gasp.

"What?" Harry asked, now getting worried for the Longbottoms. "What is it?"

"Somehow, that nasty woman got a hold of their treatment file and publicized it, and her own comments on parts of their treatment . . . and you're mentioned too," she explained.

"It's worse than that," Nicholas stated. "The conniving b—" He cut himself short upon receiving a side glance from his wife. Coral gave a quiet, amused hiss before he continued. "She essentially gave the world their hospital room number, not to mention thier general location, which has no wards or other vital wizarding protections."

Harry grew still, his mind going to Voldemort and the small number of death eaters still alive and loyal, including Bellatrix Lestrange. Would they go after them?

"I'm sure Albus has realized this and is already providing added security for them as we speak," Perenelle assured.

Nicholas nodded. "I agree, but just the same, I'm afraid for the time being any future plans of you visiting them will need to be postponed," he told Harry. "Until Albus is confident Voldemort would find the hospital too difficult to attempt an attack. I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry gave a sigh but agreed with the decision.

Just as he was going to excuse himself to his room (to do more research), an envelope appeared on top of the stack of existing mail.

Understandably, this got his attention, but it's late arrival was not the reason it now had his undivided attention. His name was on it, just below the official looking Ministry of Magic seal.

Knowing their mail was carefully examined by the Flamel elves (hence it appearing instead of being dropped by an owl), he picked it up and opened it, Coral looking on curiously.

Dear Mr. Harry Potter,

It has come to my attention that you were involved in the miraculous recovery of the Longbottoms. Now while I would have preferred to have been privy to the knowledge of their slow progress when it began instead of suddenly learning about it in this morning's paper, I understand the wish Augusta Longbottom had to keep the matter hidden from all not in direct participation. However, as Minister for Magic, I must know the condition of the citizens I serve, especially those who have impacted society as much as they have. I have a very important job to the Wizarding World and must make sure of the wellbeing of those a part of it.

With that said, allow me to be the first Ministry Official to personally thank you for this act of service to two of our heroes. As you probably well know, Alice and Frank Longbottom were among our most beloved and respected heroes of the last war. Their tragic tale still brings tears to my eyes as I think back to that time, much like now, that was utterly shrouded in uncertainty and danger at every turn.

However, let us not dwell on the past. I am writing to you now, not only to thank you, but to offer a proposition. This I do not request lightly, as I know the pressures already upon you, but I am certain this will be worth your time and effort.

The Director of St Mungos, Grant Mann, has come to me asking if I believe you would be willing to work (amount to be discussed) at St Mungos later this summer. Now, this is a tremendous responsibility and, as such, I would like you and your

guardian(s) to come sometime next week to discuss it in my office with the Director and myself. As Minister for Magic, it is my duty to ensure this is carried through to the end (especially as it was the Director who came to me asking for contact with you). I am greatly honored to be able to help in this and hope it brings health and healing to many ailing. Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a time for our meeting.

Cornelius Oswald Fudge

Minister for Magic

"Well, he certainly is full of himself," Nicholas muttered after reading it as well.

Perenelle harrumphed. "I doubt he even wrote it. It's not pompous enough. My guess would be he told his special assistant, 'Madam Umbridge', what he wanted to get across and left it at that."

"You're probably right," Nicholas said with an amused smile before growing serious. "Well, I think there's a few decisions to be made. What do you think about this, Harry?"

Harry bit his lip, glancing down at Coral. "It would give me a chance to learn more about different kinds of treatment."

"I agree, but do you want to devote part of your summer to this?" Nicholas asked.

Harry nodded after a pause, thinking about the positives and negatives about adding yet another thing on his plate. Finally, he decided. "I want to help. I mean, I don't think I want to go there every day or something, but once or twice a week I think I could do."

Nicholas and Perenelle gave approving nods.

"Alright, we'll send back an owl and you and I will speak to the Minister and Mr. Mann," Nicholas said. "Which leads me to something I've been meaning to discuss with you since the start of summer. At some point the fact we adopted you will get out, even with the Adoption Board members having the secrecy oath. So I suggest we chose how, where, and when before it is taken out of our hands."

"So, when we meet with the Minister?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but no loud announcement. I will simply not hide and let things go from there," he said. "Then later, if we need to, which I imagine we will, we will give a statement."

Harry agreed. "Alright. That'll work."

OoOoO

Harry and Nicholas handed their wands for registration after receiving small, silver, name badges with the reason for their visit (Meeting with the Minister of Magic and Director of St Mungos). Going to the security desk, Harry couldn't help but rub his aching scar. It had been acting up quite a bit since that morning, more than the rest of the past week, and all he could get from it was that Voldemort was feeling extremely anxious yet eager.

He told Nicholas and Perenelle of course, but there was little more they could do about it, save to warn Dumbledore so he could try to keep an eye on things.

Refocusing, Harry took his wand back (the dirty-haired man behind the desk doing a double take as he spotted their nametags) and headed to the Minister's office with Nicholas.

Harry wasn't surprised Nicholas knew his way around the Ministry, though he was surprised by how quickly they wove through the crowd and to the elevator. Granted, perhaps that was because everyone was so concerned about getting to where they wanted to go they were also wanting to avoid being held up. Stepping out at level one, they made their way down the hall to an ornate door at the end marked with a golden plate: 'Cornelius Fudge — Minister of Magic'.

The hall was busy, but not as chaotic as the Atrium. Lining the hall on both sides were many doors, some open, others closed, though they were all labeled with elaborate title plates. They were offices of important Ministry officials, though what they actually did, Harry had no idea. Heading to the end, beside the Minister's office, they came to a door marked 'Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic'.

Nicholas gave Harry a nod, prompting him to open the door and step in.

The office was cluttered with certificates and glittery trophies. There were a few guest chairs, as well as a desk, but it was more of a glorified entrance hall than anything else.

"Please sign your name in the registry," the man said behind the desk without looking up. He appeared extremely bored.

They did as he said, both of them putting down their full names before the overdressed bureaucrat looked up with tired eyes. However, upon spotting their nametags and their written names, he immediately became wide awake.

He quickly glanced at the clock in surprise, apparently not expecting to find the current time.

He gave a slight cough and stood with a giant smile. "Please, follow me, Mr. Flamel, Mr. Potter. You are right on time."

"Thank you," Nicholas said as the man opened a side door into the Minister's huge office.

"Minister, Mr. Potter and his guardian, Mr. Nicholas Flamel, are here for their meeting with you and Director Mann," he stated.

"Ah, send them in, send them in, Mr. Dram," Fudge beckoned, his eyes going a little wide at learning who Harry's guardian was.

The Undersecretary gave a nod and opened the door wide for Harry and Nicholas to pass. Once they did, he gently closed the door.

"Director Mann should be here shortly," Fudge said, standing from behind his desk and offering his hand.

Nicholas politely shook it before Harry followed suit.

The office was quite gaudy and much larger than what could be deemed necessary to entertain ten people. There were three other doors, two on the same side as the Undersecretary's door. One was to the special assistant's office, another directly to the hall, and the third was to another section of the Minister's office to the right of his desk. The walls were covered in portraits of past Ministers among a few ugly decorative mugs.

"Please, sit down. Tea?" Fudge offered.

"No thanks," Nicholas said, moving toward one of the chairs just as the Undersecretary door opened again.

"Director Mann, sir," Dram said.

Fudge motioned to send Mann in, taking a sip of tea and standing up, about to begin making introductions.

However, he didn't get that far as Dram followed Mann into the office, shutting the door behind him.

Harry's only warning was a pulse of magic from his guardian and Coral squeezing

his wrist before Nicholas shoved him to the floor.

Horrible echoing laughter resounded forth before it was swallowed up by a horrific *boom* that was immediately followed by a loud *booonnnnnng*.

Magic surged, and Harry could feel it streaming throughout the floor and all around them (wards?) as pain flared in his scar.

Elation.

OoOoO

Madam Bones groaned with the alarm went off in her office.

"I swear, if that man has tripped the mass-lockdown system again . . . third time," she grumbled as she hurriedly got up and ran from her office as she was joined by a handful of aurors.

"It was activated from within his office again. Shall we treat this one as a simple exercise and begin releasing the seals from the other departments?" one asked.

"No, with our luck, as soon as we do that, it'll be genuine," she said as they made their way to Fudge's office.

Entering the hall on the first floor (after lifting the seal from the elevator), they approached the minister's door at the end of the hall, slowing as they went.

Something was wrong.

All of the office doors along the hall were shut, as they should be. And amazingly all of the ministry workers had followed lockdown procedures and had run into the offices before the doors shut and sealed themselves to protect those within. However, it didn't take a ward specialist to feel the difference in the area ahead.

There were layers and layers of wards. More than the ministry had placed. Much more. And even more, after casting a careful detection charm, Bones found several nasty curses in place with a frighteningly familiar magical signature. Voldemort's.

"Get the ward and curse breakers down here immediately and begin evacuating all of the departments. I'm going to contact Albus Dumbledore," she said as the door gave a muffled rattle, as if something had exploded inside.

OoOoO

Harry, now on his hands and knees, turned just in time to see Nicholas deflect a blinding beam of yellow light. It shot away and completely disintegrated half of the photos on the wall, causing the photographed people within to scream in terror.

Nicholas threw back a curse of his own as Mann and Dram stepped toward him. However, there was a third opponent.

The side door beside Fudge's desk slammed open, a bright flash from a curse obscuring much of the male figure standing beyond the doorway.

Harry went for his wand, but it didn't matter.

Nicholas blasted Mann off his feet, making him twirl around like a broken ballerina, but before Nicholas could turn his full attention to Dram, the white curse slammed into his back.

Time seemed to slow as Nicholas fell limply onto his side, and things only got worse.

Nicholas' wand went flying through the air and right into the hand of Dram, who was laughing hysterically.

Harry didn't wait and clamored forward, gathering his magic. His mind was set and he knew time was of the essence. But he would not be healing.

Keeping his back to those in the room, he quickly brought the tip of his wand to the center of his chest before tapping it to the center of his forehead, intent welling up within him. Seconds seemed to slow as he locked eyes with Nicholas who was staring at him in astonishment. Without a word, Harry swiftly traced the Sig rune near Nicholas' collarbone, just beneath the edge of his clothes. . . .

"Harry. . . ." Nicholas breathed.

"Ah-ah-ah. No healing."

Harry didn't need to look back to identify the speaker before he was magically pulled away from Nicholas, skidding across the floor on his knees.

"Harry Potter, how are you?" Voldemort asked, walking around the desk and toward him before lightly nudging Nicholas' shoulder with his foot to turn him over.

Coral hissed angrily and Harry glared up at Voldemort, ignoring his throbbing scar as he tightened his hold on his wand. All the while, Cornelius Fudge was silently crouched in the back corner, shaking with hands over his temples as if fighting a

migraine.

"So, the Flamels? I admit, I never would have guessed," Voldemort continued as Dram waved his wand over himself.

"Ahh, much better," Dram said . . . only, it wasn't Dram. It wasn't even a man.

The richly robed official melted away to reveal Bellatrix Lestrange in silky black robes.

"A pity the curse didn't kill him. I had been looking forward to seeing its full effects," Voldemort mused absently as Nicholas slowly reopened his eyes. Voldemort grinned. "Surprised?"

Nicholas opted to remain silent.

"Well, whether you are or not, it changes nothing. Though I am a little annoyed you managed to kill Yaxley," Voldemort continued after Bellatrix had checked 'Mann'. "So I'll arrange a fitting end for you to make up for it."

Harry had yet to move, feeling Bellatrix's eyes on him and quite certain Voldemort wasn't as focused on Nicholas as it might appear. He was right, for Voldemort whipped around that instant.

"*Imperio*."

A feeling that can only be described as pure bliss came over Harry. Nothing mattered. Nothing was wrong. Everything . . . just was.

"**Stand up and lift your wand, Harry**."

The voice filtered through his mind like a calm breeze, a soft whisper promising eternal peace.

Harry stood and lifted his wand, not finding a reason not to. In fact, the thought of questioning the voice never even crossed his mind.

"**Good, Harry. Now, point your wand at our guardian**."

Harry did so, calmly looking down his wand at his guardian, not reacting at all to Coral's pleas of :Stop Harry, stop! Don't listen to him!:

Nicholas, immobilized by internal injuries, gazed back, tears gathering in his eyes. Not in fear or physical pain, but in grief for what he was certain Harry would

experience once Voldemort had lifted the Imperius.

Several seconds ticked by, Voldemort no doubt reveling in the moment. All the while, Coral was hissing hysterically, trying in vain to snap Harry out of it.

"**Now, cast the Severing Charm**."

It was in this second, this fraction of time, that something within Harry shifted and froze.

The feeling of bliss wavered and in its place came a flicker of conflict.

There was something suddenly not alright, and Harry's consciousness was suddenly aware of there being something truly, unequivocally wrong.

"**Come on, Harry. You know the spell. *Diffindo*. Slash and cast . . .** ."

What?

Harry's hand quivered a bit, his mind now fighting against the foreign euphoria. Distantly, he could just make out Coral's desperate words as he began to realize what he was doing, or trying to do/not do. His eyes met Nicholas'.

His will, that had initially been squashed before it had slowly resurfaced, suddenly swelled and solidified. Full comprehension of what he had almost been made to do rammed into the forefront of his mind, and rage beyond anything he had ever experienced overtook all other emotion.

Harry twisted away from Nicholas, thrusting his wand at Voldemort who was barely two meters from him, and roared, "*Diffindo*!"

Unfortunately, his attack was no match for Voldemort's decades of experience.

Voldemort, no longer amused, furiously flicked his wand to block the offensive charm before bringing his wand down, magically swatting Harry down like a fly and causing his wand to fly from his hand and skid across the floor.

"He's mine!" Voldemort bellowed, halting Bellatrix from taking action. "*Crucio*!"

Harry instinctively flinched and curled onto his side as Voldemort's magic rolled over him.

His protection against the Cruciatus was working, but he did not want to reveal that the dark curse wasn't working on him.

To keep up appearances, Harry thrashed a bit and released a cry he hoped was convincing. Apparently it was, and Voldemort released the curse. Harry shuddered, which he didn't need to completely fake. Voldemort's magic was disgusting. Coral gave him a comforting squeeze.

"That was only a few seconds, Harry. Shall we try five, or ten?" he questioned.

Harry shifted forward into a limp crawling position, inching his way closer to Nicholas, who was just a meter from him.

"Or perhaps you would prefer to see what someone looks like while under the Cruciatus?" he asked silkily, turning his wand toward Nicholas. "And, as you have seen the long term effects on the Longbottoms . . . how about a '*Crucio Maxima*'? I understand dear old Frank Longbottom will never fully recover, despite your . . . healing magic."

Nicholas raised his face defiantly, knowing anything he might say would not help them.

Harry's heart was in his throat, suddenly wishing he had devoted time to placing the invaluable protection on more than just himself, his friends and Coral. Why had he thought he could wait to place it on the two people who were now his family — his parents? And what would happen to Nicholas when he was already hurt?

Harry's expression told Voldemort all he wanted to know.

"Let's start out easy. *Crucio*!"

Harry lurched forward, trying to take the curse instead, but a painful grip on his shoulder yanked him back.

"Oh, no, itty-bitty boy," Bellatrix purred into his ear as he watched the suffering of Nicholas in horror.

"No! Stop!" Harry shouted, struggling. "Stop it!"

Voldemort held the curse for a few more seconds before letting it lift. Nicholas collapsed, wheezing.

"A very powerful spell, no? Quite captivating. *Crucio*!"

Harry was too furious to cry.

After what felt like an eternity, it stopped. Voldemort grinned and Bellatrix laughed.

Heaving in deep breaths now, his forehead drenched in sweat, Harry's muscles trembled in absolute fury as Coral hissed profanities that only seemed to entertain Voldemort. Harry closed his eyes, unable to look at what was before him anymore.

"Well, I think that's enough of the simple pain. As much as I enjoy this, we have things to do in the next room, Harry. *Crucio Ma*—"

Something snapped within Harry as Bellatrix released a high pitched shriek and let go of Harry's shoulder — thanks to Coral who had latched onto the side of her palm. With a burst of whirling magic, Harry dived forward, right between Voldemort and Flamel.

"—*xima*!"

Harry landed at the feet of his guardian as a horrible tearing sensation rocked his very core. It felt as if one of his legs were being ripped off, but it was deeper than that. An unrelenting pull that would not be denied overtook all other sensation and far exceeded every pain Harry had ever experienced. He could not think, say, or scream anything, not even the wish to let it end.

To Harry it felt as if it went on forever, but in reality Voldemort cut off the spell soon after the words had left his lips.

"Harry!" Nicholas shouted, attempting but failing to sit up.

"Idiot boy!" Voldemort snarled as Bellatrix continued shrieking behind him, though she had finally shaken Coral off.

Coral was now on the floor, beneath the chair at the other end of the room, watching.

Voldemort was livid as he stared down at Harry who was taking short, shuddering breaths with his eyes barely open.

"Enough," Voldemort hissed, pointing his wand at Nicholas. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry could only watch as the green curse sailed over him, but, strangely, he was not concerned at all.

The air seemed to solidify around them as something massive rose up like an ocean wave and met the killing curse. And continued forward relentlessly.

In a horrifying and awesome flood of power, the entire room shook as Voldemort's body was bashed back. His scream was cut short when what was left of his body

slammed into the wall. His broken wand clattered to the floor.

"My Lord!" Bellatrix cried, still in pain herself as she hurried to help him.

However, she didn't make it that far as her legs gave out from under her. She face planted, unmistakably breaking her nose on the granite floor as she landed. Dead. The bite mark from Coral now bright red.

Crumpled against the wall, Voldemort suddenly released several painful hacking coughs that were followed by gurgles. His skin quickly began to take on a sickly hue and the flesh on his face seemed to sink into his skull, as if he was starving.

Everything he had gained from Vincent Crabbe had been undone.

"Noo . . ." Voldemort moaned with a dry, choking breath. "I . . . will not die!"

In a last, defiant move, Voldemort sent himself toward Harry, his failing magic no doubt aiding in his low, bizarre flight.

However, he was immediately intercepted.

Nicholas, as enraged as any guardian could ever be, leapt and caught Voldemort around the waist, causing them to tumble in a heap of struggling limbs.

"AHHHHH!"

The Dark Lord, lover of torture and murder, screamed hysterically as Nicholas grabbed him with his bare hands. The smell of burning flesh quickly saturated the room, but Nicholas was not bothered in the least as he slammed his fist into the side of Voldemort's shriveling face, leaving behind severe knuckle shaped burns.

Throwing out his hand, Nicholas summoned his wand with a burst of wandless magic and thrust himself back and onto his feet in a surprisingly smooth motion, curse on his lips.

But he didn't cast as he felt Harry step up to his side, Voldemort now struggling desperately for air.

"No . . ." Voldemort weakly hissed. "I will not. I . . . refuse. . . ."

Still aiming his wand, Nicholas placed his free hand on Harry's shoulder as they stared down at the dying Dark Lord. The surreal moment stretched on, Voldemort's eyes growing more and more frantic as the end grew closer.

"I-I am L-Lord Vol . . . Vol . . ." His voice failed him and his chest shuddered . . . and, finally, stilled.

Harry swallowed before glancing up at Nicholas.

"It's over, Harry. It's over."

Final part is under construction.

A/N: Yes, the story is coming to an end. I know I probably could have stretched it out, but with how busy and crazy life is becoming, I figured it would be best to not risk making you all wait for months and months, if not a year+, or worse, never finishing it.

Side-note: Concerning my short story, Abraham, that's in the Kindle Store on Amazon, I've been asked how long it is and figured others might be wondering too. It's just under 9000 words, which is why the price is what it is :). If anyone has any other questions, feel free to ask ^^.

Epilogue

A/N: I'll open by saying 'No, I'm not dead' and 'sorry this took me so long!' I won't bother to explain why it took me forever to finally finish this, but I do hope you all enjoy reading this final part. I have tried my best to at least answer everything I felt important but know that I have decided to leave a few things open-ended. Anyway, here it is :D

Part 34: Epilogue

The day Harry Potter had died had finally arrived. It was a long time in coming but Severus had decided, if he were to ever reveal the truth to anyone, it would be on this day when it had all been undone. And so, Severus allowed himself to reminisce as he waited for his visitor. . . .

The days following Voldemort's demise had been chaotic and surreal, and for Severus it was even more so. The instant Voldemort's end had finally and irreparably come, Severus' dark mark had vanished in a brief flash of pain, but the wave of shocked relief was quickly replaced with trepidation and worry.

What exactly had happened? Had anyone died in bringing Voldemort down? Was everyone he knew alright?

The answers came that very hour from Madam Bones and through Dumbledore's pensieve in his office.

Yaxley, one of the two remaining loyal Death Eaters at the time, had infiltrated Ministry security and adjusted the wards around the Minister's office. The spell on Fudge made this very easy, allowing Yaxley's manipulations to appear as false alarms that Fudge had allegedly caused until the wards had been shaped to Voldemort's specifications. Looking back, Bones wanted to kick herself.

As for Voldemort's end, Nicholas had kindly provided his memory of the event. Viewed by Madam Bones, a handful of Order members and a few professors, the memory left them all stunned and utterly amazed.

"How is this possible, Albus?" Minerva asked breathlessly as they stared down at the corpse of Voldemort — the memory frozen in that moment. "That Rite . . . Potter shouldn't. . . . How?"

"I believe Harry has his magic block to thank," Dumbledore whispered. "When he

took the Cruciatus meant for Nicholas, it fulfilled the Rite's willing sacrifice condition. When this happened, the magic needed to activate the protection was sought and found when Voldemort attempted to kill Nicholas. However, instead of using all of Harry's magic like it normally would have — taking his life as a result — it struck his block. This halted the drain and saved Harry's life, as well as his magic behind the block."

"'His magic behind the block'? So does that mean his magic that had been in front of the block . . . ?" Madam Bones began.

"Is gone," Dumbledore supplied.

"I daresay the loss of all of his magic would have been worth this," Moody grunted, eyeing the pathetic, shriveled form at his feet.

Severus pulled himself back from the memory, not caring to recall how Sirius had practically leapt down Mad-eye's throat at his words, not apprechiating the old auror's callousness.

As much as Severus would have preferred Harry to have come out of the war totally unscathed, he also knew that the Harry of his future, as well as the present, would have agreed with Moody. Both of them — future Harry and current Harry — had been willing to do whatever was necessary to end Voldemort, and both of them had done it.

The total sacrifice of the first had enabled the willing sacrifice of the second to occur and succeed, providing a far brighter future than Severus had imagined and could ever have hoped for.

Severus closed his eyes, once again counting all of the blessings and fortunate happenings at and after the demise of the Dark Lord.

All of Voldemort's followers had either turned traitor or been killed and those who had turned soon received amnesty from the Ministry — though Severus questioned the wisdom of that action. Severus didn't want Lucius or the others kissed of course, but they had still done things that they should have answered for. However, he supposed, some would argue it was best in this instance to just let things go and look to the future.

The Malfoys and other families of former Death Eaters rose up in society. Where the end of the first war had left them under the scrutiny of many Light families and mistrusted by those with half a brain, they were now greatly respected and, by some, practically revered. Under different circumstances this would have horrified Severus,

but his relationship with them, as well as their sons' interactions with Harry, put him at ease. It didn't mean he wouldn't forever keep an eye on them however — whether or not he actually felt it was still necessary.

The world was different, or at least the Wizarding World. The Ministry had shed some of its bigotry and had gained some common sense, as hard as that is to believe. Oddly enough, much of it was because of Lucius Malfoy. Who knew the man could actually do some good if he wasn't focusing so much on gaining power? Though, Severus was sure, the blond's productive redirection was due to his family's debt to Harry who, for the past few years, had taken a firm stance against corruption.

Severus couldn't help but marvel at Harry's impact on the Wizarding World, even now. Ever since Harry had reentered it people gravitated to his side, eager to support and help him in any way they could. Mr. Lee, the representative from Vietnam and former werewolf, kept his promise and provided support and information whenever he could. Aage Brown, the representative from Ethiopia, helped him with any international medical studies and Mr. Walter McCaffrey, the first adult werewolf cured, had become a successful businessman and provided funds and industrial support for Harry's projects and programs. As time went on, more and more people gave their support and Severus was sure the list of names could now fill at least a few dozen feet of parchment.

Once Harry had regained enough magical control to use his parcelmagic again — as the Rite had completely shattered his block — he had returned to doing what he did best. Healing. And so, before he graduated from Hogwarts and even before he started his apprenticeship under Dumbledore in his fourth year, Harry had stepped out and continued from where his appearance at the International Confederation of Wizards had left off. He started out small, ironically doing what the letter from Fudge had suggested he do with St Mungos, but it didn't take long before it had branched beyond Britain.

But before that, Harry had had to adjust to how the world now viewed him.

Unsurprisingly, the news of the Dark Lord's demise spread quickly, including, despite Bones' efforts, Harry's part in it.

It was like Halloween, 1981, all over again — only ten times worse.

Obliviators had their hands full for weeks, but that was the least of it.

Harry was no longer simply known as 'the-boy-who-lived', but also 'the-child-of-life' and 'the-life-keeper', among others. Severus had to admit though, one was quite amusing (thanks to Dumbledore pointing it out), and even Harry found it rather

hilarious.

'The Lifesaver'.

Despite his wish that the Wizarding World would stop thinking up these ridiculous titles to call Harry, he had to admit he liked this one. Severus wondered what they would say if they knew about the sweet. Would they apologize for calling him a tiny, edible lifebuoy?

Severus shook himself, just as he heard a knock at his door.

With a small smile he snapped his fingers, signaling to his house elf, Mittens, to get the living room ready while he went to answer the front door.

Most would think he'd be nervous now that this moment had come, but all he was feeling was the anticipation of a huge weight being lifted from him. He had kept this secret for a long time and he had been ready to share it for nearly just as long, but now was finally the time.

He opened the door.

O

Harry walked up the quiet stone path with, as always, Coral around his wrist.

She was undeniably a veteran at assisting Harry in Healing now, and (if others could understand her) was as knowledgable as any good medi-witch. She was adored by all the workers at St. Mungos and shamelessly enjoyed their praises (to which Harry ruthlessly teased her for).

The last few years had been exceptionally good to him, and, being 19 years old, he was looking forward to truly building it with someone.

Harry smiled softly, his thoughts going to his delightful (albeit oddball) girlfriend, Luna Lovegood.

She had just started an apprenticeship with someone rumored to be a former Unspeakable (who could neither confirm nor deny the allegation), and she was hoping to make strides in the field of selfless magic to use in a new field: Sustained Healing. After learning about organ donors in the muggle world, Luna was confident they could take that amazing gift a step further. The possibilities were astounding and Harry felt nothing but pride for her and the progress she was making; however, he hoped she would be willing to take a different step soon, with him.

Harry's plan was to ask the big question soon, perhaps in the coming month if he got up the courage.

He was already envisioning their life together, and it was glorious. . . .

He and Luna cooking dinner while watching their two or three children happily playing in the backyard with Dobby and Coral.

Harry shook himself as the front porch came into view.

Dobby was doing well, still proudly wearing his uniform and serving Harry with as much gusto as ever in the new home Harry had acquired about a year before.

Although the Flamels were willing to have Harry continue living with them, as their property was more than big enough, Harry felt it time to step out on his own at the arguably young age of 18. With his healing work he could easily support himself and had long ago become indepentant; besides, his desire to impress Luna was more than enough to cause him to focus on making a life after Hogwarts.

Now nineteen, Harry was the Head of Healing at the Center of World Health (CWH), an organization the ICW had created soon after he had finished his medi-wizard training at St. Mungos (which occurred at the tender age of 15 while apprenticing under Dumbledore). Understanding the need for international cooperation to discover cures and treatments for muggle and magical illnesses, conditions, and injuries, the CWH was born and given to the care of Harry who had proven that the incurable was not so incurable after all.

After the death of Voldemort, Harry's learning really took flight, partly due to being able to take electives, which were Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures (not to mention no longer needing to worry about war and death). He had been tempted to take Arithmancy instead of Care of Magical Creatures, but Nicholas had said he'd be more than happy to teach it to him over the summers alongside Alchemy, which he ended up doing.

As for Hogwarts and her professors, things continued as they always had, save for a few things of note. Madam Pomfrey now offered an introductory medi-witch/wizard course on the weekends and Professor Lupin (with the help of Professor Flitwick) started up a Wizard Duel Tournament that they organized once a term.

Harry smiled to himself, thinking of the former werewolf and his parents' other old friends.

Remus Lupin had become a surrogate uncle to him soon after he had started his

third year at Hogwarts, despite Lupin also being one of his professors. Somehow, it just worked. Sirius Black, however, took a bit longer to build a relationship with, and he never truly fit into the same 'uncle'/mentor category Lupin had risen to. In some ways, it was better this way (to Harry at least), but the sad fact of the matter was that Sirius would never be the father figure he wished he could have become. That is not to say Harry never saw him or didn't become part of his life; on the contrary, he visited quite often during the summers.

At first, Harry wasn't sure about what he should do, but after some prompting from the Flamels, Harry agreed to visit Sirius. He didn't regret it. Sirius became the fun uncle, and though Harry never grew into a prankster, he quickly fell in love with flying and Quidditch thanks to him. This, big surprise, led to Harry joining Hufflepuff's quidditch team in his fourth year and becoming captain in his sixth. What was a surprise was when Neville Longbottom tried out and quickly became Hufflepuff's new keeper.

Harry still vividly remembered Neville's first game. His parents had been able to make it and watched proudly from the stands. Neville had been so nervous that when they took to the skies he left the ground like a first year before he managed to calm his nerves enough to prove why he had become Hufflepuff's new keeper—which was saying something, as they were against Gryffindor and Ronald Weasley (the 'King') was their keeper.

Alice and Frank (Frank especially) loved watching their son play and as time went on they were able to do what all other parents often take for granted, such as looking at marks to giving permission to visit a friends' house. Although late, they were able to experience what they had missed out on for so long—being Neville's mum and dad.

And now, they were looking forward to becoming grandparents.

Neville and Hermione Granger fell in love not long before graduation and married soon after. They were now expecting and, thanks to a muggle invention called an ultrasound machine, knew their child was a boy. Names were still up in the air, but they still had a few months before they had to really decide.

With a happy sigh, Harry stepped onto the porch, stopped in front of the door and knocked.

Before too long, the door opened to reveal his favorite professor.

"Hello, Professor," Harry greeted.

"Hello, Mr. Potter, do come in," Severus said, stepping aside.

Harry entered and removed his simple cloak.

-Pop-

"Mittens will take that for Great-Sir!" Mittens said, eagerly relieving Harry of the garment.

Harry barely managed to hold back a sigh. Severus gave him a sympathetic look.

"I've tried," Severus said softly as Mittens hurried off.

"I have too," Harry returned. "Maybe someday. Thank Merlin for Dobby. He's the only one who doesn't get all—" Harry lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers, expressing what words could not.

"I understand," Severus said with a hidden smile, before glancing at the pensieve on the table in the other room.

"Are you alright, Professor? You seem distracted," Harry said after a moment, seeing as Severus had yet to move.

Severus didn't answer; instead, he motioned for Harry to follow him and led them into the living room where Mittens had set a rather luxorious snack tray. But Harry's eyes were not on the perfectly arranged food, but on the pensieve placed out in the open.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, not sure if he should be concerned.

"I have something to show you. It is a secret I no longer need to keep, at least from you," he said, giving a nod to the pensieve.

The direction was clear, so Harry didn't hesitate as he stepped to the table, trusting his confusion and concern would soon be lifted by explanation.

"I'll wait here," Severus added, before Harry dived into the memory. . . .

Immediately, Harry knew this was not a normal memory. First off, he was in it, but . . . it was not him.

His doppleganger appeared to be about the age he was now, but he wasn't as tall as he was, nor was he as well dressed. In fact, his clothes were in shambles and his health wasn't far behind.

As his double knelt down beside a circle of blood drawn runes, Harry quickly looked

around to find the place was completely unfamiliar to him and utterly dilapidated; however, a figure standing in a doorway was recognizable.

"Professor?" Harry whispered in question, mostly to himself.

Memory-Snape of course did not acknowledge him but looked to the kneeling Harry.

"Is it ready?" he asked.

Memory-Harry nodded. "Soon, all of this will be undone and you will be able to make everything right."

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as you are."

Memory-Snape harrumphed.

"I trust you, Severus," Harry said, stepping back and entering the network of runes drawn on the floor. "If anyone can do this, it's you."

"You have a great deal of confidence in me, Harry, more than I would have ever thought I would receive from you . . . or anyone. I will try not to disappoint, not that you will know if I fail."

"Dumbledore trusted you as much as I do," Harry pointed out. "And you won't fail. You're too stubborn."

"Stubbornness does not always lead to victory."

"Here it will. We are sending your soul back to the time before we began losing. If that's not the embodiment of stubbornness, the refusal to be defeated, I don't know what is."

"At the cost of your life. At the cost of you," Future-Severus reminded.

"I will live on, for I will not only be remembered by you, but will be shaped and changed by you. Whatever part of me is lost due to that is no sacrifice. My younger-self could not wish for a better watcher."

Future-Severus smiled softly, his eyes thick with so much emotion it was impossible to identify them, but there were no tears. "A potter, you mean."

Future-Harry stilled at that, but his eyes were content. "Perhaps."

Harry was utterly still, his mind taking all of it in as he began to piece everything together.

Severus was a time traveler.

He had been sent back by his future-self to prevent a terrible future, presumably caused by Lord Voldemort. What had the Professor changed? When exactly had he returned? Did anyone else know? Why was Severus revealing this now?

"Is there anything you want me to tell your younger-self?" Severus asked, pulling Harry's attention back to the man again.

Future-Harry straightened up, though he tilted his head slightly in thought as Harry waited with bated breath. After a moment, Future-Harry nodded to himself with a wicked grin. "I know, tell him I had said this: 'Severus needs a girlfriend. If he has not found someone by the time you turn 19, I implore you, my younger-self, remedy this.'"

"I shouldn't have asked," Severus deadpanned.

Future-Harry snickered, though he soon became serious once more as he said, "It's time."

Severus stepped forward, entering another circle on the floor.

Harry watched in amazement as his former-future-self opened up his hands to reveal intricate markings that went from his fingertips and up his wrists, only to vanish beneath his robes. Although his arms were covered in sleeves, the markings on them soon began to glow so brightly that they simply shined right through the cloth. After a few more seconds, the runes on his back and chest lit up just as brightly. And then the runes on the floor erupted, Severus standing in awe as magic surged forward, instantly encompassing his very being.

The air was so thick Harry was glad he was just an observer and not physically there. He could only imagine how it had actually felt.

Magic was now rippling so heavily the ground itself was wavering as Severus and Future-Harry locked eyes.

"To shape and change," Severus whispered in the last moment, just as Future-Harry began to crumple and all burst white.

And then the memory ended. But it was not over. There was one other thing Severus

wanted Harry to see. . . .

He found himself standing by Severus, who was simply standing beside Slug & Jiggers Apothecary, but before Harry could wonder why, he saw them — Hagrid and his much younger-self, the day he had reentered the wizarding world.

Severus smoothly intercepted them. "Good morning, Hagrid."

"Hello, Perfessor," Hagrid said cheerfully. "Was just helpin' 'Arry 'ere ter get his school supplies."

"I see," Severus said. Harry couldn't help but note how his eyes warmly but swiftly glanced at his younger-self.

"Oh! Oh, sorry, 'Arry, this is Perfessor Snape. He's goin' ter be another one of yer perfessors. He's also Head of Slytherin House. Perfessor, this is 'Arry Potter."

His tiny-self promptly threw out his hand. "Hello, Professor Snape."

Harry could still remember how intimidated but eager to please he had been when he had taken Severus' hand, but only in this moment did he realize it had been more than a mere handshake.

It had been the beginning.

"Hello, Mr. Potter."

Harry was jarred out of the pensieve, but he recovered quickly.

Harry turned to find Severus waiting patiently at the far end of the couch. Without a word, he took the seat across from him. For a long time neither of them spoke, but then Harry cleared his throat.

"I guess it's lucky you have a girlfriend now."

"*Fiancée,*" Severus corrected.

Harry smirked, though a question soon surfaced. "Does she know?"

He shook his head, "No, and I doubt she ever will. In fact, if I have it my way, no one else will ever learn of this."

Harry paused for a moment before continuing. "Was she in that future?"

"No, or at least, I had never met her."

"How much has changed?" Harry asked.

"More than I can say, but things today are vastly better than they had turned out originally."

"I can only imagine how the world had been with Voldemort winning."

"When we had decided to try time travel, he had already won months before . . . in Europe anyway."

Harry swallowed thickly at that, before glancing at the snack tray to gather his thoughts.

"Everyone had died, hadn't they?"

"Almost everyone, but that doesn't matter anymore. Things are different and Voldemort is now gone for good."

"Why are you telling me all of this now?" Harry asked, looking back at him.

"I felt it fitting to share my secret with you today as, in the old future, this was the day you sent me back."

Harry smiled, wondering how different he had become because of Snape — but he would not ask that now, for his former-self was right. He could not have wished for a better watcher, or potter. "And I believe it was the best thing I ever . . . had ever, er . . . once upon a time, did."

"Quite," Severus agreed, amused.

O

The Wizarding World would look back on Harry Potter and the time he lived as the years of mighty change. His friends, family, and mentors would be seen as heroic giants marching alongside and behind a selfless king. Suffice it to say, he was fondly remembered well beyond the following centuries.

Harry and Luna married a few months after he had learned of Severus' time travel. Harry kept Severus' secret, though strangely (or perhaps not so strangely) Luna hinted that she knew. Severus didn't seem to mind at all.

Soon after, though not immediately after, they had a daughter, Lilan, closely followed

by a rather big surprise—triplets, two of whom were identical twin boys, Julian and Ramses. The third was another girl, Morissa. Lilan followed in her father's footsteps and became a magnificent healer, being named 'The Restorer', whereas the triplets stretched into a bit of everything, becoming 'the Three Masters'. They were all parselmouths.

Harry became known as 'The Mage of Life', while Luna became 'the Lady of Restoration', thanks to her work in sacrificial magic and organ donations.

Harry and Luna's best friends, Neville and Hermione, had a part in history as well, helping to shape the Center of World Health and assisting in many of Harry's projects. Neville focused in Alchemy and Herbology, while Hermione became the queen of research and invention, teaming up with Luna to meld imagination and logic to create unparalleled solutions. The two couples were often compared to the founders of Hogwarts, but the fruits of their labors went well beyond the bounds of a nation.

As for Harry's two other most well-known friends, they made their impacts on history as well.

After working his way up the ranks as an Auror, Gregory Goyle became the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He became more renown than Mad-Eye Moody. He had two children, one who he named after Vincent.

Draco became Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot after holding many other political positions, including a Govenor of Hogwarts as his father had been. He had seven children, one named after his father and another after Severus Snape. He helped fund many of Harry's projects, as well as promote and share them with the Wizarding World.

Coral, wanting a family of her own, laid a nest with a handsome but stern serpent who insisted on sticking around well after the offspring had hatched—which was why Coral liked him to begin with. The Potters were happy to welcome more serpents into their home.

Dobby excitedly served the Potters for the rest of his life and was survived by a son and daughter-house elf had with a she-elf Luna rescued not long after marrying Harry. They were named Wiglet and Meebles.

In regard to Harry's mentors, though they did not shine as brightly in history, they were not forgotten either.

According to philosophers centuries in the future, the Flamels' most notable

contribution to the world had been their care of Harry. They imparted something into Harry he had never been privileged with in his early years or in the original timeline. True parental love and guidance — to be loved unconditionally and disciplined appropriately. Along with Alchemy, Arithmancy and a load of other things, the Flamels had shown Harry how to be a good parent. Not a perfect one, as that is impossible, but a good one. With their model, Harry (with Luna) had gone on to raise four magnificent individuals who in turn continued his work, directly impacting the next five generations of the wizarding world. And so, a couple who had been unable to have children of their own had been able to leave an undying legacy anyway. The philosopher's stone paled in comparison.

Albus Dumbledore, the greatest Headmaster of Hogwarts in the 20th and 21st centuries, would be seen by historians as one of the most influential wizards in the second millennium. After Voldemort's death, he slowly but systematically relinquished the numerous positions he held, taking on a more advisory role as he helped establish procedures and official (and 'unofficial') codes of ethics that would help shape and vastly improve the way the wizarding society was governed. A decade later, and clearly no longer a single 'ray of light', Dumbledore was finally able to do what he had always dreamed of doing — fully step out of the limelight and partake in the finer things of life. Welcomed into the Potter family as a kind of honorary grandfather, he reveled in spoiling Harry's children and, around the same time, was thrilled to hold Severus' only son. And so, when his time finally came, after many more years, Dumbledore passed away in his sleep, ancient but content.

As for Severus Snape, the man who was responsible for all that had come to pass, he married a beautiful woman just a few years younger than himself not long before Harry married Luna. They only had one child and named him Theseus Harrison Snape. Severus never said so, but 'Harrison' was in honor of the Harry he had known and in thanks to the Harry he now knew.

The world would never know of the immense sacrifice Severus had given and witnessed. They would never know of the future they would have died or been enslaved in, but they did know he was the man who helped shape Harry into the man they all revered. They knew him as the Great Potions Master, the Brave Slytherin, and the Wise Headmaster — and for Severus that was more than enough. He didn't care or need to be remembered by the world. He had done what he had intended to do — to Shape and Change the future.

~~~THE END~~~

A/N: Well, it is done. Thanks so much for reading and to those who have reviewed.
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Your thoughts, fears, and honest critiques helped me and my muse a great deal. It has been a fun ride, and though I will miss writing for this story, I won't lie, it is also a relief that it is finally finished. Thanks again ^^