

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or the Midnight Series.

This is the sequel to "The Marauders Read Trials of a Champion"

"The Marauders Read Burden of a Destiny"

Sirius Black opened his eyes. He stretched lazily on the bed. He looked around and smiled. How he loved waking up at the Potter's. Sometimes he still had to remind himself that he didn't have to go back to disapproving stares, degrading comments, twitched noses.

He got up happily and looked outside. It was once again storming. Honestly, the weather couldn't make it's mind up. He looked at his roommates and they were both in deep sleep. He smiled, it wasn't often he was the first one up. He tiptoed to where Remus was sleeping, mouth slightly opened, and grabbing a feather from the desk put it right next to Remus's mouth. With the next intake of breath of Remus the feather went with the air and the poor marauder was soon awake and coughing. He glared at a laughing Sirius.

"Not funny Padfoot," he hissed and got up. He went to the bathroom before Sirius had time to recover and realize he would have to wait. Sirius sat on his bed pouting.

A yelp from the next bed had Sirius on his feet and Remus out the door pointing his toothbrush to where the sound came.

"My head," James said rubbing his head and looking at the book that had fallen on it.

"At least it wasn't mine this time," Sirius said looking at Remus, "Hum, Moony, what were you going to do with that?" he asked pointing at the toothbrush. Remus smiled sheepishly and went back to the bathroom.

"Burden of a Destiny," James read, "Really not liking the title."

"Well, lets go wake Lily and have breakfast so we can start reading," Sirius said ushering his friend.

After breakfast they were all seated back in James' room and he started reading.

Chapter 1

The Ancient and Noble House of Black

"Oh God! No!" Sirius cried from the bed where he was seated.

"Calm down Padfoot," Remus said next to him, "We were already expecting this."

"Still," he whined.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin helped bring in the school trunks and other luggage for the new arrivals. Both were trying to be as quiet as possible but it was difficult with so many. Sirius and Remus were partially dreading this change. Although the company would do some good, they were hesitant of the stress this would put on their charge.

Harry Potter, also known as the-boy-who-lived, was still recovering from his duel with Lord Voldemort that had taken place a little over a month ago. No one other than Sirius, Remus, Professor Albus Dumbledore (the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry), and Madam Pomfrey (the school's mediwitch) knew how slow Harry's recovery actually was. No one outside of the four of them was aware of how difficult every single night was for the soon-to-be fifteen-year-old.

"Really not liking the sound of that," James said annoyed from the floor next to the armchair.

It had taken a lot of time for Sirius and Remus to help Harry deal with the death of Cedric Diggory, the first victim of the second war. Harry had felt incredibly guilty for his part in Cedric's death although Harry had nearly sacrificed his own life to protect Cedric. The teenager had finally accepted that he had done everything possible to save Cedric's life but that didn't stop the nightmares from coming and with the nightmares came the episodes.

"Episodes? What episodes?" Lily asked from the armchair she had claimed once more.

It had nearly given both Sirius and Remus a stroke when in the middle of a violent nightmare Harry stopped breathing.

"WHAT?" the four cried.

They had heard him screaming and hurried into his room to see him thrashing in bed. Sirius had jumped on the bed and held the boy's shoulders in place while Remus grabbed the boy's legs. They both tried to wake Harry but nothing worked until Harry suddenly stopped moving...and stopped breathing.

Remus ran out of the room to call for help while Sirius had tried to revive Harry. For nearly five minutes Sirius received no response. His pleas became more and more desperate with each attempt. Professor Dumbledore had arrived with Madam Pomfrey, who worked on the unmoving teenager once Dumbledore and Remus pried Sirius away. For a quarter of an hour the three wizards waited outside of the room praying and hoping until Madam Pomfrey came out looking completely exhausted.

The diagnosis wasn't good.

"Really? Who would have thought that stop breathing wasn't good?" Sirius growled.

"Sirius, sarcasm does not help now," Remus chided him.

Ever since Harry's third year at Hogwarts, his magic started to mature faster than normal. Last year it had gotten out of control forcing Harry to wear a necklace that would suppress the outbursts that would come without warning. While Harry was being held captive by the Dark Lord the necklace had been removed leaving Harry to deal with the outbursts on his own, something he had never learned how to do. One outburst was a force to be reckoned with but Harry had suffered through three in a matter of minutes. As a result, Harry's body experienced physical and magical exhaustion that no body should ever have to endure. His lungs had collapsed; his heart had nearly shut down and was still healing.

Evidently not as quickly as the four individuals believed.

To help Harry's healing, he now had to take a simple potion once a day to help his heart along. He was also monitored during the night to ensure something like this didn't happen again. Spells were cast in the room and attuned to alert everyone in the house the moment Harry was in any sort of duress. His heart was monitored magically much like it had been in the hospital wing at Hogwarts before he had left for the summer holidays.

This had all taken a bit to get used to but Harry's heart hadn't stopped since the measures were put in place so Sirius and Remus felt it was worth it. There had been a few nightmares that had put some stress on Harry's heart but with the precautions in place, Sirius and Remus were able to wake Harry before he was in any real danger.

"Good!" James said relieved.

The sound of the trunk hitting the floor pulled both Marauders out of their thoughts. Quickly turning to the commotion, Sirius and Remus saw the smiling faces of the Weasley twins, Fred

and George. A glare from Sirius wiped the smiles off of their faces. Sirius could be a kid with the best of them but when it came to Harry, the former Azkaban inmate could be quite stern. The rebirth of Voldemort had sent the protective nature of both Marauders into overdrive. From letters Harry had learned that the recently turned seventeen-year-olds had just received their Apparation license which allowed them to disappear from one place and appear in another. Sirius and Remus had been warned that the twins were currently extremely eager to use their magic now that they were of age, something that the adults in the Black House were really dreading.

"I feel your pain," Lily said, "I bet Mrs. Potter is dreading next year too."

"Why would she?" James asked.

"You and Sirius will be of age Prongs," Remus explained.

"Yes," James said dreamily, "But why would mum dread it?" he asked puzzled.

"For the same reason Mrs. Weasley must have dreaded the twins coming of age," Lily explained.

"I have no idea what they are going on about," Sirius said, "I really don't know why anyone would dread us being able to use magic out of school."

"People really have no faith in us at all Paddy," James said sadly, "Like we would do anything!"

Sirius shook his head and Remus and Lily snorted together.

Next to enter was Harry's best friend, Ron Weasley. The tall fifteen-year-old was looking around in awe before looking directly at Sirius and Remus with a slightly confused look on his face. "Where's Harry?" he asked instantly.

Sirius and Remus glanced at each other before Sirius answered. "He's sleeping," he said firmly. "Please try to keep it down."

Ginny Weasley, the youngest of the Weasley siblings and only girl had followed Ron in. "Is he all right?" she asked. "He didn't say anything was wrong in his letters to the family. Did something happen?"

"Harry will be fine," Remus said in a reassuring tone. "He just needs rest. He's still a little worn out from everything that happened with Voldemort."

The Weasley children flinched at the sound of Voldemort's name. Mrs. Weasley entered the house followed by her husband. The Weasley parents had been warned that everything wasn't as bright and cheerful as Harry had portrayed in his letters. Sirius and Remus knew if anyone would help them with Harry's condition it would be Arthur and Molly Weasley. The couple loved Harry like one of their own.

"Harry is a very loveable boy," James said happily, "Just like his old man."

"At least he isn't big headed like his old man," Lily muttered.

"Molly, Arthur," Remus said with a nod. "If you'll head into the kitchen the meeting is about to start." Mr. Weasley left for the kitchen but Mrs. Weasley remained. Remus then turned to the four Weasley children. "You four can head upstairs. You'll find your names on your bedroom doors."

"We expect you to go straight to bed," Sirius added as Remus left for the kitchen. "Tomorrow is Harry's birthday and we want to make it special." Sirius was about follow Remus when he stopped and turned back to face the teenagers. "Also, don't go searching for Harry," he said evenly. "Let him sleep. You can talk to him in the morning."

"So serious Sirius," James said with a straight face.

Sirius smacked his forehead and rolled his eyes.

The four Weasleys nodded but it was obvious they were disappointed. "You heard Sirius, children," Mrs. Weasley said. "Now off to bed."

Under the watchful gaze of their mother, Fred, George, Ron and Ginny strolled up the stairs to the bedrooms. Mrs. Weasley had already charmed the trunks to be feather light so each teenager had no problem carrying their own trunk up the stairs. They found the third door on the left marked 'Fred and George', the fourth door on the left marked 'Ron' and the fourth on the right marked 'Hermione and Ginny'. Each Weasley entered their designated room and dropped off their trunk but found it difficult to stay put. Where was Harry? Why was Sirius so persistent on leaving Harry to his rest?

"Because he needs his rest," Sirius said firmly, "Now, obey me!"

Remus rolled on the bed laughing.

"Moony?" James asked worried.

"He just sounded like a tyrannical king of some sort now," Remus said gasping. He puffed his chest and said theatrically, "Now obey me peasants!" and promptly fell backwards laughing again. Lily and James joined the laughter.

"Not funny," Sirius scowled.

Fred and George came out of their room first and stood in the doorway of Ron's. "We're going to do some harmless exploring, Ronnikins," said George. "Care to join us?"

"I'm coming too," Ginny said from behind them.

"Excellent!" said Fred.

"If anyone asks we were looking for the loo," Ron said then followed his siblings.

They walked past four more bedrooms until they reached the end of the hallway forcing them to turn right. They entered another hallway of rooms with strange names on them. The first door on the left had 'Moony' on it while the first door on the right had 'Padfoot' on it.

"Aw, how cute," Lily cooed.

Sirius and Remus glared at her.

"We're not *cute*," Sirius hissed.

"Oh, yes you are," James said pinching Sirius' cheeks and being smacked for it.

Fred and George stared at each other in disbelief. It couldn't be. The infamous Marauders were staying here?

"Oh, yeah! I forgot they didn't know," Remus said. "Uh,oh, that's not good!"

The next door on the left was partially open with 'Pronglet' on the door. As they drew closer, they could hear a strange soft beeping sound coming from the room. There was a distinct pattern to it, sounding somewhat like something they had heard in the hospital wing a month ago while Harry was unconscious. With curiosity getting the better of them, the twins peeked in the room and couldn't believe the sight before them.

Sleeping in a large four poster bed was the very person they had been told not to look for. It was Harry. He was sleeping on his back with his head turned away from the door. The duvet covered him up to the middle of his chest allowing the twins to see that the shirt he was wearing was form fitting, revealing that Harry had put on some muscle in the past month and the growth spurt he was in the middle of. All in all Harry looked healthy except that his breathing seemed to be somewhat uneven.

"That's good then," Lily said pleased.

"Yea," James said, "Though I'd like an even breath better."

"Well?" Ron asked impatiently.

Fred and George looked at each other before stepping back and closing the door completely. The last thing they wanted was to anger Sirius Black their first night here. "Well, Harry's sleeping in there," Fred said at last. "Remember what Sirius said so...I think we should head back to our rooms."

Ron and Ginny looked at each other in confusion. It was a rare occurrence for Fred and George to fear an adult.

"Well, you see Ron. They are smart. Any smart person would fear me," Sirius said nodding.

"Than I must be really dumb," James told Lily and received a pillow on the face for that.

"What's going on?" Ron asked suspiciously. Receiving no answer, Ron pushed past his brothers, opened the door and poked his head in. Everyone could hear his sigh of relief when he saw Harry. Closing the door again, Ron turned to his brothers and stared at him with narrow eyes. "He's fine," he said quietly. "Why were you acting like he was on his death bed?"

"We weren't," George answered just as quietly. "We just didn't want you to wake him up. Come on, we can play a game of Exploding Snap in our room until the meeting is over." Without another word Fred and George retreated back to their room, leaving a very confused Ron and Ginny. The two youngest of the Weasley siblings had noticed that the twins had been acting extremely odd for the past month. They weren't as social as they normally were, spending the majority of their time in their room inventing for their joke shop. The only time Fred and George made themselves present was when a letter from Harry had arrived. It was just strange.

Harry Potter awoke to darkness like he did every morning. Pulling himself out of bed as he rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes, the birthday boy mentally prepared himself for an extremely long day. For the past week Sirius and Remus have pestered Harry about his birthday much like they did last year. They wanted to know what Harry wanted to do, what Harry wanted to eat, what presents he wanted...it was enough to make anyone's head spin. Truthfully, Harry didn't want anything. Sirius and Remus had already given Harry anything he could possibly need within the first two weeks of the summer holidays.

"Did nothing more than our job then," Remus said proudly. Sirius nodded and James and Lily beamed.

It had taken that long for Harry to convince his guardians that he wasn't made out of glass. After the heart stopping episode, Sirius and Remus had restricted him to bed rest. He had protested at first but Sirius and Remus wouldn't listen. As a result, Harry had completed all of his homework in record time but it was dreadfully boring. You can only sleep so much.

Noticing that this method wasn't working, Sirius and Remus bought Harry books on a variety of topics that could possibly help him with his outbursts. Madam Pomfrey had been a life saver when she ordered Remus and Sirius to start Harry on minor physical activity to get his strength back up. It wasn't a good sign when Harry nearly fainted every time he got out of bed to use the bathroom.

Sirius jumped at the opportunity. He continued teaching Harry the basics of tae-kwon-do that they started on last summer and started teaching Harry tai chi. There was no sparring involved since Sirius felt Harry's heart couldn't handle it yet but the parts of the arts that Harry could learn provided an unbelievable change in the teenager. Within a month's time Harry could control some of his smaller outbursts with the help of the relaxation techniques learned through tai-chi. He hadn't experience any of the more powerful outbursts yet but something was better than nothing.

After cleaning up, changing clothes and taking his prescribed potion, Harry left his room as quietly as possible while grabbing his glasses on the way out. Despite Remus' claim that Sirius was a sound sleeper, the man always seemed to wake the moment Harry left his room. Stepping into the dimly lit hallway, Harry tiptoed past all of the closed doors and continued down the staircase just like he did every morning. The silence in the house was a little on the eerie side considering how many usually spent the night in the large Manor. It wasn't uncommon for members of the Order to spend the night in one of the guest rooms, especially

when the meetings ran late. Harry didn't mind, he was on a first name basis with most of them anyways.

The Order of the Phoenix was a secret society led by Professor Dumbledore. It consisted of people who believed Voldemort had in fact returned and were prepared to fight regardless of what the Ministry was currently saying. Sirius and Remus had been a part of the Order last time along with Harry's parents so they had given Harry a pretty good picture of what the Order was about. The Noble House of Black had been designated as Headquarters for the Order since it was unplotable. The Black family had used every charm in the book to hide Number 12, Grimmauld Place and with the Fidelius Charm in place, no one could find this place unless the secret keeper revealed it which Dumbledore wasn't about to do.

Living at Headquarters had been both overwhelming and frustrating for Harry. He had met a lot of people who had known his parents and was able to learn more about them than he had ever dreamed but there had also been the times when he had been sent out of the room because something came up that was for 'members only'. Harry never said anything but Remus and Sirius must have noticed something was wrong because the next morning the two Marauders pulled Harry aside for one of their talks.

They explained that some things the Order would be discussing weren't necessarily pleasant and weren't something a teenager should be hearing. Seeing that Harry didn't understand, Remus said the one thing that would make Harry agree to anything. "We are not trying to hurt you, cub. You have lost so much of your childhood already. We just want you to try to enjoy what small part of it you have left. If we learn anything we think you need to know we *will* tell you. That's a promise."

"And Moony never breaks his promises," James said seriously, "Unless chocolate is involved."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Remus asked defensively.

"You promised us a Chocolate Frog if we did our homework early. The homework is done where's the chocolate? Haven't seen it," James said.

Remus grunted and mumbled. He went to his rucksack next to his bed. Rummaged a little trying to hide the contents and very grudgingly gave Sirius and James each a Chocolate Frog. He was about to go back to the bed when he spotted Lily's expectant eye. He grunted again something that sounded a lot like "My precious chocolate" but got another Chocolate Frog and gave it to her.

Harry accepted that. After that Harry simply did as he was told, no questions asked. He didn't blame Sirius and Remus for wanting him to enjoy what was left of his childhood. They were right. He didn't have much of a childhood living with the Dursleys. It had been two years since he had been rescued from them and their abuse but the reminders of it were still there. Every time Sirius and Remus caught Harry cleaning they silently cursed before telling Harry to stop. The cooking they had given up trying to stop Harry from doing since Harry was the best cook of the three of them.

"Oh, please tell me I didn't let Padfoot cook?" Remus asked horrified.

"I regret that!" Sirius said.

"Padfoot, you almost blew mom's kitchen last time you tried," James reasoned. Sirius just huffed.

Entering the kitchen, Harry turned on the lights, rolled up his sleeves and got to work on breakfast. He was aware that there were now several more Weasleys under the roof and would have to make quite a bit more than he normally did. He started with the muffins and while they were baking moved on to the eggs and bacon. Harry figured he would take the easy way out and make scrambled eggs today.

"Harry, there is a time when you have to choose between what is easy and what is right," Sirius said seriously, "And what is right is to make me pancakes."

He was attacked with pillows from every side.

Once the muffins were done, Harry started brewing the coffee and preparing the tea. By the time he started making the toast the kitchen door opened and two half asleep men entered.

"Morning Pronglet," Sirius said as he moved to the kitchen table and sat down which was what Harry and Remus expected him to do. Sirius Black was completely useless in the kitchen.

"See, even Harry knows that," James pointed at the passage. Sirius just glared.

"Happy Birthday."

"Happy Birthday!" the four yelled.

Harry nodded his thanks as he placed a cup in front of Sirius that would be filled with coffee the moment it was ready before returning to the bacon and eggs. Remus grabbed a basket and started putting muffins in it apparently fighting to stay awake. "Long meeting last night?" Harry asked curiously.

"You have no idea," Remus muttered as he put the basket of muffins on the table and took over making the toast. "Severus was here last night so we all had to hear of how dangerous his position is."

Sirius let out a snort at the comment. Professor Severus Snape was currently working undercover as a Death Eater.

"Figured it was him," Remus grimaced.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"When Voldemort said: *"Three are dead, one is too much of a coward to return to me and the final has left me. He shall pay for his treachery with his life."* The one that he thought had left was Snape but I bet Dumbledore made him go back and lie to Voldemort," Remus explained.

"How can we know he is lying to Voldemort and not Dumbledore?" James asked suspiciously.

"I figure Snape is not stupid and as the ultimate Slytherin he cares for himself. He must have figured that being enslaved to Voldemort isn't that great so he helps Dumbledore," Remus said.

"Still, I don't trust him," James said.

"Me neither," Sirius seconded.

"I agree with Remus," Lily said.

It had been Snape who had revealed that Voldemort, like Harry, hadn't left the graveyard that night without injury. According to Professor Snape, the Dark Lord was currently trapped in some sort of coma but was moved from place to place often so no one knew where to find him unless you were in the inner circle, something Professor Snape hadn't been able to accomplish yet.

"Sorry I missed it," Harry said as grabbed the coffee pot and filled Sirius' cup. He then grabbed the cream out of the ice box and set it down in front of Sirius. He knew his godfather preferred a lot of cream in his coffee. "So how did the move go last night?"

Sirius' head instantly popped up. "Did they wake you?" he asked quickly.

"I didn't hear a thing," Harry answered honestly as he put the bacon on a plate that was charmed to keep the food warm then pulled out a large bowl for the eggs. "I just remember what it was like my first few days here and knowing the Weasleys I figured they would be curious about the Order."

"I think they were more curious about you, cub," Remus said as he put two plates of toast on the table. "Be ready for a lot of questions today. They'll want to know everything about the Order—"

"—but I don't know anything," Harry interrupted as he set the bowl now filled with eggs on the table. The bowl was also charmed to keep the food warm. It was the only way to make meals with so many people under one roof.

"But they don't know that," Remus said calmly as he moved to the ice box and pulled out a pitcher of juice to set on the table. "I'm sure Molly and Arthur have told their children less than we've told you. You can't blame them for being curious. You were until we talked to you."

"Point," Harry said as he filled a kettle with water for tea and placed it on the stove. Turning around, Harry noticed that Remus had already started making the porridge. Remus usually helped Harry with every meal while Sirius 'supervised'.

"That means Sirius does nothing and every now and then nicks some food," James explained.

"Hey, someone must do the quality control!" Sirius cried.

This was normally the time when most of their talks took place since no one else was around. They had many talks about the events after the third task in this very room. "So what do you want me to say to them?"

"Tell them the truth," Sirius said with a shrug then took a sip of his coffee. "You *don't* really know anything about the Order other than the history of it. If you're honest with them, they won't pester you about it anymore...at least let's hope they don't."

The sound of the door opening ended their conversation quickly. As if on cue, all three of them looked towards the door to see Mrs. Weasley standing in the doorway with a surprised look on her face. Harry suddenly felt nervous. Was she expecting to be making breakfast now that she was living here? "What's all this?" Mrs. Weasley asked then looked at Harry. "I thought you were supposed to be taking it easy, Harry, dear."

"Harry usually cooks the meals with us, Molly," Remus said casually. "Harry likes to feel like he's helping the Order. This is a happy medium for all parties. Don't worry. Harry's cooking is certainly more edible than Sirius' could ever be."

Everyone glanced at Sirius waiting for a retort but nothing came. Noticing the silence, Sirius looked up from his coffee cup with a raised eyebrow. "What?" he asked. "I'm not going to argue with the truth. My cooking usually comes out like my last name: black."

"At least he stopped deluding himself," Remus patted Sirius back ignoring the death glare he was receiving.

Both Remus and Harry smiled at the comment because they knew it *was* the truth. "Honestly Molly, Harry's fine. Remus and I never let him cook without someone present just in case."

Mrs. Weasley seemed reluctant to believe Harry's guardians but nodded anyways and sat down across from Sirius. The high pitched noise fired from the kettle causing Harry to jump. Turning off the heat, Harry grabbed the kettle and prepared two cups of tea: one for Remus and one for him. Setting the two cups on the table, Harry turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Coffee, tea or juice?" he asked.

"Tea would be wonderful, dear," Mrs. Weasley said kindly.

Harry prepared her tea as Remus finished the porridge. Once everyone sat down, they ate in silence until the door opened again. A woman with short and spiky violet colored hair entered the kitchen and sat down next to Harry; ruffling his short messy hair as she did so (this woman had given him a haircut a few weeks ago). Her name was Nymphadora Tonks but she preferred to be called simply Tonks. She was a Metamorphmagus, someone who was able to change their appearance at will. She was also Sirius' cousin which, in her mind, gave her the right to treat Harry like a relative since Sirius had adopted him.

"It's so weird to hear they call Dora a woman," Sirius said, "She's three!"

"Wotcher, everyone," Tonks said as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "So what's on the menu today, Harry?" She looked around at the food and shook her head slowly. "No one your age should enjoy cooking as much as you do, kid." She leaned to her right and playfully nudged Harry, earning a nudge from him in return. Tonks could rival Sirius when it came to acting like a kid. Both of them seemed to find it their mission in life to make Harry laugh and bring some of the joy back into his life in a way that only family could. The prank war between them a few weeks ago was just one of the many instances when Harry and Remus felt it was best to steer clear of the Black family. It had turned quite brutal in the later rounds. It wasn't unusual to see Sirius with multicolored hair one day and Tonks with changing colored skin the next.

"Oh, yes," Sirius said fondly, "That sounds like Dora."

"You just said she's three!" Lily exclaimed.

"Lily, you haven't met the kid," James said, "She's a menace I tell you! A menace!"

"Well, someone in this family needs to be able to make a meal without burning down the place or breaking every dish they touch," Harry countered with a smile as he put some eggs and bacon on his plate. Everyone in the Order was aware of Tonks' clumsiness and made a point to keep anything that was breakable out of her hands.

Sirius snorted in his coffee cup while Remus tried to hold back a chuckle. "He's got us there, Tonks," Sirius said, "and we're the outcasts in the *beloved* family. That's not saying a lot for the Blacks, a bunch of pureblood hypocrites..."

Tonks shook her head and rolled her eyes as she grabbed a muffin and stood up. "I'm off to work," she said regretfully. "Happy Birthday Harry. I want to hear all about what these two goofballs put you through when I get back so I can plot my revenge."

"See," James said, "A menace!"

"Hey!" Sirius and Remus said at the same time.

Tonks grinned. "What can I say?" she asked innocently. "I've got a soft spot for the kid." She shot Harry a wink before leaving the kitchen.

Bill Weasley, the eldest of the Weasley siblings entered a few moments later. He covered his mouth to hide a yawn as he sat down next to Mrs. Weasley. "Morning Sirius, Remus, Mum and Happy Birthday Harry," he said as he poured himself a cup of tea. Bill used to work for Gringotts Bank in Egypt and now works for Gringotts in London. Rumor had it that Bill was also now dating Fleur Delacour, one of the Triwizard champions who now worked at Gringotts with him. It was a rumor because Harry had only heard about it from Ron. Bill hadn't said a word about his personal life.

"So Harry, do you feel up to a little training this morning?" Sirius asked as he grabbed a muffin.

Harry bit back a sarcastic retort. It seemed that some people still thought he was made out of glass. "I'm fine, Sirius," he said. "I've been fine for a few weeks now. Just because I had one nightmare—"

"—that nearly killed you," Sirius muttered.

"But it didn't," Harry protested. He was really getting sick of this discussion. "I don't know what I have to do to convince everyone that I'm fine now. I'm sorry if I scared you—er—*that night* and I'm sorry if I scared you when I had that nightmare. It wasn't like I intentionally tried to kill myself or something." Seeing everyone staring at him Harry realized that probably wasn't the smartest thing to say. "Look, I'm not saying I'm ready to face *him* again but I'm not going to collapse after walking a few steps. School starts in about a month. I'll need to make through an entire day of classes without resting. I need to start preparing myself for that."

"Harry has a point," Remus said and noticed Sirius moved to object. "He has to be ready for school days, Sirius. If Dumbledore wants to keep his condition a secret, we have to do the best we can to make certain no one finds out about it. If anyone loyal to Voldemort—" Remus glanced at Mrs. Weasley and Bill who flinched at the mentioning of the Dark Lord's name before continuing, "—found out that Harry was still suffering from the duel then he could become a target. Right now they are focused on their master. What will happen when he wakes? He will go after Harry for revenge."

"I hate when Moony uses *reason*," Sirius mumbled.

Sirius stared at Remus for a moment before shifting his gaze to Harry. "Go to the training room when you're done eating," he said softly. "I'll go change." Without another word, Sirius

stood up and left the room, taking his muffin with him. Perhaps that hadn't been the right thing to say to an overprotective godfather.

Mrs. Weasley let out a sigh and shook her head, clearly not approving of what had transpired but knew it wasn't her place to say anything. "You be careful, dear," she said to Harry. "I know you think you can handle it but there's nothing wrong with taking things slow. From what Sirius and Remus tell me you've made excellent progress so far."

Harry let out a sigh as he rested his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. Mrs. Weasley had a point but Harry was so tired of waiting. He had basically done that all summer. "Was it really that bad?" he asked Remus.

Remus took a slow sip of his tea. "Honestly?" he asked as he set his tea cup down. "I've never been so scared in all my life...on both occasions. Sirius puts up a tough exterior because he has to. He's Sirius Black, the only man to escape from Azkaban and your godfather. He has a reputation to uphold in public but privately Sirius is far from the person he portrays. He doesn't really trust people anymore and he certainly doesn't trust anyone with you. Give him time, Harry. Sooner or later he'll realize you're not as fragile as he thinks."

"Umph," Sirius grunted as he was assaulted by three huggers.

"No need to be the tough guy Paddy," James said.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or the Midnight Series.

Chapter 2

A Birthday to Remember

Sirius clapped happily. The other three stared.

"What? I love birthdays!"

After an hour and a half of training Harry needed to take a break. He was sweating and his breathing was a little labored. It had been longer than Sirius had expected Harry to last but

for Harry it wasn't long enough. How was he supposed to handle school and Quidditch if he couldn't even handle his godfather's training? Whoever the new captain for the Gryffindor team was certainly wouldn't go easy on him. At this rate he would probably pass out in the middle of the game.

"Don't be so harsh on yourself Harry. You're still recovering," Lily said patting the book. She eyed Remus, who was once again writing on his list, and in a whisper she asked James, "I am worried about that list. Is that normal?"

"Normal, no. Moony normal, well, what is normal for Moony really?"

"You two do know that I have enhanced hearing don't you?"

Lily jumped and blushed.

This was also the time when Ron, Ginny, Fred and George had finished breakfast and started looking for Harry. Remus and Sirius had been right. The Weasley siblings wanted to know everything about the Order and what was going on to make Sirius and Remus so protective. The Order topic was easy since Harry didn't really know anything other than who the members were. The other topic was a little trickier. Harry tried to convince the Weasley siblings that Sirius and Remus were still upset because of what happened after the third task but he could tell they didn't really believe it.

The discussion was put on hold when it came time to prepare lunch. Ron, Fred and George sat at the table while Harry, Remus, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny cooked.

Remus crossed his arms disapprovingly, "So we slave away while they eat?"

"Moony, what did you expect?" Sirius asked bewildered.

"Besides, would you really want to eat something the twins cooked?" Lily asked and Remus shook his head violently.

Lunch was usually the smallest meal of the day because everyone was usually at work although it wasn't unusual for a few people to stop by for a quite bite and a little small talk with Sirius and Remus. The main topic of discussion was normally how to hold off the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

Harry still hadn't given his statement to Fudge about the night Cedric died. He had managed to show the memory to a few selected adults before 'going into hiding for his own protection' (at least that was what Sirius and Remus claimed he had done). Harry hadn't been up for talking the last time he saw the Minister and knew the man didn't believe a single word Professor Dumbledore had told him. Fudge had even implied that Harry had killed Cedric but the Diggorys didn't believe that and ordered the Minister not to tarnish their son's memory by making false accusations. Running out of options, Fudge had even gone as far as to demand for Harry's presence at the Ministry or Sirius and Remus would be charged with interfering in an investigation.

"He can't do that!" Lily cried.

"Unfortunately he can," James huffed.

Mr. Fudge received a rather nasty howler from Sirius after that was said.

"You are becoming quite fond of Howlers aren't you Padfoot?" Remus asked and Sirius grinned.

Sirius had more than enough dirt on Fudge, something the Minister was all too aware of so the investigation was currently on hold, awaiting Harry's statement which would most likely be taken the second Harry entered Hogwarts. As long as Harry was under the care of his guardians he was protected from the Ministry. Ever since Fudge had tried to order the Dementor's Kiss on Sirius and failed, the coward of a man had made an effort to steer clear of the former Azkaban inmate.

Professor Dumbledore wasn't as fortunate as Harry. The moment Dumbledore revealed the Voldemort had returned, the Ministry (more precisely Fudge) had tried to discredit him. It didn't help that Rita Skeeter was still writing her usual articles blaming Dumbledore for anything she could and claiming that Harry was being used as a pawn by Dumbledore so people would believe him (Skeeter was also afraid of what Sirius would do to her if she said something bad about Harry). The articles were nothing but lie after lie but apparently some people believed them. Professor Dumbledore had been voted out of the Chairmanship of the International Confederation of Wizards, he was demoted from being Chief Warlock on the Wizengamot (the Wizard High Court), and there was even rumors going around that his Order of Merlin, First Class was going to be taken away.

"It's despicable how one man can hold so much power," Remus said in disgust.

Dumbledore tried to downplay everything but everyone could tell the fact that no one believed Voldemort had returned bothered him. Too many people were blind of the corruption in the Ministry to know any better. It also didn't help that there were quite a few supporters of Voldemort that had high positions in the Ministry, Lucius Malfoy, the very person who arranged for Harry and Cedric to be transported to the graveyard for Voldemort's rebirth being one of them.

After lunch Harry was bombarded by questions again when Hermione arrived. Hermione had always felt the need to know everything and was a little put out to learn that Harry didn't know much. Although, she did enjoy learning about the history of the Order and wanted to know everything everyone had done in the past month. She (and the Weasleys since Harry hadn't revealed much yet) were shocked to learn about Harry being restricted to his bed for the first two weeks but was ecstatic (while Ron was horrified) to find out that Harry had completed his homework. Both Harry and Hermione then turned to Ron, silently asking how his homework was coming along.

"That's not nice Harry," James scolded.

"Yes, poor Ron had no incentive," Sirius said.

"Remus shouldn't have to resort to bribery to get you two to do your homework," Lily scolded.

"Lily! Of course he should!" James said shocked.

Ron avoiding their gaze was all they needed to know that Ron was far from finished. Hermione took it upon herself to inform Ron that first thing tomorrow they would start working on it and keep working until every assignment was complete, much to Ron's horror. Seeing the exchange, Harry couldn't help but feel bad for Ron. Hermione could be relentless when it came to schoolwork.

As the afternoon faded into the evening, Harry was once again in the kitchen with Remus, Ginny, Hermione and Mrs. Weasley. There were a lot of people expected for dinner and the three new comers felt bad that Harry was working on his birthday and insisted on helping. The help was welcomed until Harry felt a wave of power wash over him, catching him off guard. Grabbing the counter for balance, Harry focused on his tai-chi training as he closed his

eyes. Breathing deeply, Harry mentally ran through his exercises as a hand rested on his back, reminding him that he wasn't alone.

When the wave finally vanished, Harry nearly fell to the floor only to be held up by Remus. "It's okay, Harry," Remus said softly. "It's over now." Before Harry could do anything Remus helped Harry to a chair to sit in then hurrying off to get a glass of water.

"Moony always knows what to do," Sirius said sagely. Remus blushed. Lily smacked Sirius.

"Don't make him uncomfortable."

Opening his eyes, Harry noticed that there were three worried witches staring at him. *Great*, he thought sarcastically. *How am I going to explain this?* Remus stepped in front of Harry and handed over the glass of water. Taking a sip of the cool liquid, Harry instantly started thinking of possible excuses he could make but his mind wasn't working at a reliable rate. Although he could handle the smaller outbursts they still took quite a bit out of him when they came. The only thing running through Harry's head was: why now?

"Hermione and Ginny, please find Sirius," Mrs. Weasley said, breaking the silence. Both girls moved to protest but were silenced with a look. Reluctantly, they both left the kitchen. The moment the door closed, Mrs. Weasley cast a privacy charm on the door so no one could hear what was said. "Was that one of them?" she asked softly.

Remus nodded. "That was a rather small one," he said as he pulled up a chair and sat down across from Harry. He looked at Harry's tired face and gave the teen a reassuring smile. "How are you feeling, cub? Do you need to lie down?"

Harry shook his head as he took another sip of water. That would only make matters worse. "I'll be fine," he said as he met Remus' gaze. He could already feel the foggiest in his head leaving. It would just be a few more minutes before he trusted himself to stand again. "What am I going to tell them?" Harry asked worriedly.

"How about, hum, the truth," Remus said.

Remus let out a sigh as he rubbed his eyes. "You could try for the truth, you know," he proposed. "They're your friends, Harry. Do you really think they would turn away from you if they found out about this? We haven't. We've been able to help you through this. Maybe they can too."

"Yes, see how I wisely agree with myself," Remus said, "Take my advice."

"I have a feeling that by the end of this books Remus' ego will be inflated beyond repair," James told the other two. Sirius sighed dramatically and nodded. Remus glared at them.

Harry shook his head. There were many reasons Harry didn't want his friends knowing about this. The biggest one of them was fear. He was afraid of scaring them away. He was afraid of being different. It had been difficult to hide it from them last year with the outbursts coming when Harry least expected it but the suppression necklace had helped. He didn't have that luxury anymore. Dumbledore wanted to give Harry time to adapt to these bursts of magic before resorting to the necklace again. "No, if they let it slip—"

Seeing that Harry wasn't going to agree, Mrs. Weasley stepped in. "We'll just say you were a little lightheaded, Harry, dear," she said gently. "Everyone knows you're still recovering but this is a very large secret to keep. Are you sure that's really what you want to do?"

"Very smart Mrs. Weasley. Quite the mischievous mind," Sirius beamed.

"Well, the twins had to get it from somewhere," Lily pointed out.

The door swung open ending their conversation. Sirius was the first to enter followed by Hermione, Ginny and Ron. The three teenagers watched nervously as Sirius hurried to Harry's side. "Harry's fine, Sirius," Remus said casually as he stole a glance at Harry. "He was just a little *lightheaded*. Why don't you two talk while we finish preparing dinner?"

Sirius nodded, not missing the emphasis Remus put on the word 'lightheaded', and sat down. After a moment, Ron pulled out a chair and sat down while Hermione and Ginny went back to helping Mrs. Weasley and Remus. Trying to break the silence, Sirius told Harry that he had been cornered by Fred and George who figured out that two of their idols were living here. A variety of topics were then brought up from Quidditch to the Ministry with Remus, Mrs. Wesley, Hermione and Ginny jumping in to comment or question every now and then.

"FINALLY!" James cried.

"Hum, James. Are you okay?" Lily asked slowly.

"Yes, why?"

"You just had a little strange and unrelated fit over there," Remus said eyeing James worriedly.

"It wasn't unrelated. I said: Finally, Mr. Moony and Mr. Padfoot are going to instruct Mr. Gred and Mr. Forge on the arts of Mayhem and Mischief."

Lily and Remus rolled their eyes huffing and Sirius clapped, "Yes! Finally!" he cried.

"God help us!" Remus mumbled.

As dinner time drew near, people started arriving. Tonks was first and was rather disappointed to hear that Sirius and Remus hadn't pulled any pranks on Harry. She ruffled Harry's hair before sitting down next to Sirius. Mad-Eye Moody, one of Harry's previous Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, entered a few moments later. His appearance could be described in only one word: frightening. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were shocked to see Moody walk up to Harry and wish him a Happy Birthday like they were old friends.

The rest of the visitors treated Harry in a similar fashion. Kingsley Shacklebolt, a tall and friendly black wizard who worked at the Ministry as an Auror entered with Bill Weasley and Mr. Weasley. Sturgis Podmore, Hestia Jones, Dedalus Diggle, Emmeline Vance and Elphias Dodge arrived at the same time. By the time Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall arrived the kitchen was more than half full.

"Hey, I know Kingsley and Hestia!" James cried.

"We do too James," Lily said annoyed, "They are at Hogwarts. I think Emmeline Vance graduated a couple of years ago."

"Yep, Sirius had a major crush on her our first year," Remus said. "He even gave her flowers and asked her out."

Lily burst out laughing.

"Excuse me," Sirius glared offended, "What's so funny?"

"A first year asking a fifth year out. That's funny," she said gasping.

As the meal started, various conversations broke out around the table, Harry's *lightheadedness* forgotten. Looking around the table, Harry noticed that Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George seemed to be overwhelmed just trying to take it all in. It seemed odd that this sort of chaos was normal for dinnertime at Grimmauld Place. This was the time when

Harry learned the most of the outside world. There were plenty on Ministry employees seated around the table who had spent the entire day out in that world.

Harry understood why he had to stay at Gimmauld Place. He knew staying in this place was for his own protection. The Ministry wanted to question him and the Death Eaters wanted to capture him at the very least. Sirius and Remus had made it clear how dangerous times were to be the-boy-who-lived. Harry accepted this. That didn't mean he had to like it.

A hand on his shoulder pulled Harry out of his thoughts. "Is something wrong, Pronglet?" Sirius asked softly. "You're really quiet tonight."

Harry shook his head and gave Sirius a reassuring smile. The last thing he wanted to do was worry his godfather. Sirius could really be a pest when he thought you were keeping something from him.

"Yes, he can," Remus huffed.

"Why do I have the feeling Sirius was the one that prodded and prodded until he found out your secret," Lily said smirking.

"Because he was!" Remus cried waving his arms, "And he got James into the investigation too! He just can't leave well enough alone!"

"I honestly don't see what all the fuss is about," Sirius said calmly.

"Just thinking," Harry said. "Do you think I'll be able to go to Diagon Alley when my letter arrives? I wanted to pick up some things."

Sirius looked a little nervous as he appeared to be considering the request. "We'll see,"

"Which is parentish for 'not a chance in hell'," James huffed.

"Parentish?" Remus asked.

"Yes, Parentish- the language spoken by parents," James explained in a "isn't it obvious" tone.

he said finally which could be translated into 'if Remus and I think it's safe enough which I know it isn't'.

"See," James said and the others just nodded.

"I can't promise anything. I'll talk to Moony. I know you hate being locked in this place. It can feel quite claustrophobic when compared to Hogwarts. We just want to keep you safe. If the Ministry were to see you—"

"—I know," Harry said as his gaze fell. He knew that Sirius was more afraid of Fudge and his supporters using him as a political ploy than anything. Since Fudge hadn't actually heard Harry confirm Dumbledore's suspicions there was still hope that the-boy-who-lived wasn't 'turning against the Ministry', at least in Fudge's mind.

This was what they had learned from Percy Weasley who was working as Fudge's assistant. Percy's position had been a difficult choice for the Weasley family to accept. Sirius and Remus had helped Percy through the mess made when Percy's old boss, Barty Crouch, was found at Hogwarts suffering from a shattered mind. Although no one outside of the Order knew about the involvement of Marauders, Percy had returned the favor by helping the Order, especially when Fudge gave him a promotion. Fudge had given Percy the position because of his family's close friendship with Harry and Professor Dumbledore. To protect his family, Percy staged a falling out with Mr. Weasley at the Ministry of Magic. To the public's knowledge, Percy abandoned his family for his career. In reality, Percy kept in touch through letters passed through members of the Order who worked in the Ministry.

"That's very brave of him," Lily nodded.

"Yes, because if Fudge finds out he'll be sacked in a second," Remus said.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "I know you do," he said with a smile. "So what did you want to go to Diagon Alley for?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. The excuse of 'I need some fresh air' probably wouldn't suffice. "A few books and I need to refill my potion's kit," he said. "Moony said that this year will be hard. I just want to be prepared."

Sirius let out an annoyed scoff as he rolled his eyes. "Stop listening to Moony," he said.

Remus glared at Sirius who smiled innocently.

"You're bound to drive yourself mad. You have another month before you need to worry about school. Concentrate on your recovery, all right? I know you have made a lot of progress

in the past month but you still have a long way to go. I'll feel a lot better when we don't have to monitor you during the night."

Harry let the subject drop after that comment. He knew that Sirius and Remus were extremely worried about his current health. There had been more than one occasion when Harry had woken to see either Sirius or Remus asleep in a chair at his bedside. There had even had been times when Harry had opened his eyes to find Midnight (the name Harry had given Sirius' Animagus form, otherwise known as Padfoot) asleep on the bed. It wasn't so frequent anymore but it served as a reminder to Harry of how much he had put his guardians through in such a short amount of time.

"Harry, it's a reminder of how much you went through not of how much you have put your guardians through," Sirius cried in disbelief, "Honestly, can't he ever think of himself." He finished trying to grab Remus's list. Surprisingly, Remus was able to avoid him and write at the same time.

"I think it's time for presents," Mrs. Weasley announced.

Harry looked at Sirius and Remus in confusion. Both of them were obviously avoiding Harry's gaze. *That can't be good.* As if on cue a small mountain of presents appeared in front of Harry making the teenager's eyes widen in surprise. He had told everyone repeatedly that he didn't want anything for his birthday but apparently some people were a little hard of hearing. None of them realized that having people around that didn't hate you was a gift in itself.

Nervous with so many watching him, Harry started to open his presents. After opening the presents from his friends and the Weasleys, he reached a rather large and long present. He once again glanced at Sirius, half expecting for it to be a prank before unwrapping it. Once the wrapping paper was pulled away, Sirius and Remus helped Harry pull off the top of the box to reveal a large black telescope. To say Harry was stunned was an understatement. He had never seen anything like it before. The telescopes at Hogwarts didn't compare to the one in front of him.

"Everyone in the Order chipped in to thank you for everything you've done for us," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "We all know it isn't easy having your home taken over by adults. We all appreciate how understanding you have been, Harry. I also believe this can be of assistance with your present from your guardians."

Harry turned to his guardians who were each holding a thin present. Remus handed his over first. With shaky hands, Harry unwrapped the present and pulled off the top of the box off. Inside was what appeared to be a certificate. Before Harry could take a closer look Sirius handed the present he was holding over. Harry took the hint and opened that one to see that it was the same thing. Now taking a closer look, Harry noticed that it was a registry certificate. He also noticed that on one certificate the name 'Lily Potter' was written in gold while 'James Potter' was written on the other.

"These are Star Registry Certificates, Harry," Remus said, breaking the silence as he knelt down at Harry's side. "If you look here—" he pointed at some numbers and letters underneath the names, "—these are the coordinates where you can look through the telescope to see the stars named after your parents. We thought that this way—well, if you ever wanted to talk to them you could just look up to the stars and they would be there, waiting to listen."

"HELP MOONY!"

"Only if you help me!"

Sirius and Remus had been tackled on the bed and pinned down by the two future parents and were being hugged fiercely.

Harry was speechless. Running his fingers over his parents' names, Harry couldn't believe Sirius and Remus had done this for him. His guardians had told him enough stories about Lily and James Potter for Harry to feel like he somewhat knew them now but this was more than he could ever hope for. Being able to talk to his parents was something Harry had never thought possible. Sure, it wasn't the same as talking to them in person but nothing ever would be.

Fighting back the tears that were coming, Harry gave each of his guardians a fierce hug while whispering a heartfelt 'thank you' since he really didn't trust his voice at the moment. The more time Harry spent with his guardians the more they tended to surprise him. In all his life Harry had never thought he would find guardians who would ever treat him like this. It seemed that he had gone from one end of the spectrum to the other. The hate from the Dursleys was replaced by the love from Sirius and Remus, something Harry was still trying to get used to.

Turning back to the crowd, Harry couldn't help but notice that there were quite a few people with tears in their eyes. Regardless of what had happened in the past few months, Harry

knew he wasn't really alone. He had more people that cared about him than he had ever dreamed. How do you tell people that they are the reason you aren't dwelling on the past? "Thanks everyone," Harry said sincerely. "I really appreciate...everything."

Sirius pulled Harry into a one-armed embrace. "Don't mention it, kiddo," he said with a grin. "Just remember this is the type of birthday you deserve."

"Yes, HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY!" James cried.

Harry looked at Sirius and returned the grin before looking at Remus who ruffled Harry's hair. For the first time in a long time, Harry felt happy. All of the worries of the outside world didn't matter right now. Whatever happened with the Ministry and Voldemort would happen. Right now Harry could only focus on the present. Sirius was right. He needed to concentrate on his recovery first. The sooner Madam Pomfrey declared him healthy the better.

"Harry. Hate to tell you but Madam Pomfrey wouldn't declare the healthiest person on earth healthy," James said knowingly.

A/N: Um...wow! I didn't think I would have such a response so soon. There are a few things I need to straighten out when it comes to Harry and his guardians. Sirius' animagus isn't a dog for nothing. Sirius is a protector, a guard dog if you will. Remus has learned just to let him be only adding points when necessary. Sirius wants to keep Harry close and probably would be suffocating him by now if Remus wasn't there to keep Sirius in check. Remus is rational, he has to be. It may appear that Harry and Sirius are closer but that's not necessarily the case. After all, Harry would go mad with two mother hens hovering over him. :-)

"Oh, Ksomm814 that's so true. I do have to keep him in check all the time. He can't go anywhere without a leash," Remus sighed and Sirius thumped him with a pillow.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter or the Midnight Series.

Chapter 3

Secrets Revealed

The next week passed slowly. Fred and George had cornered their investor and showed him what they had thought of for their joke shop. Harry just watched as the twins went over their inventions trying not to be overwhelmed. He had known Fred and George Weasley were creative but he had never thought they would accomplish so much in such little time. They had been extremely proud to show off their Extendable Ears, an item that allows someone to listen in on conversations. Harry made a mental note to tell Sirius and Remus about that invention. There were plenty of conversations that took place in these walls that were meant to be private.

"Harry, Harry, Harry, you never tell on fellow mischief makers," Sirius said shaking his head. "Ow." He glared at Remus who had just smacked him.

Keeping his own affairs private had proven to be more difficult than Harry thought it ever could be. The curiosity of his friends had been something he hadn't been prepared for although he should have been. He had avoided their questions ever since the school year ended about what had happened to him because he wasn't ready to talk about what happened with them. He had worked through his guilt, anger and depression with Sirius and Remus. Why should he have to relive it all again just to settle their curiosity?

"He is right, and wrong," Lily said.

Sirius looked at her and asked, "Care to elaborate?"

"He is right because he shouldn't have to relive it to settle people's curiosity but at the same time his friends aren't just curious, they are worried and if they don't know what happened they can't help," Lily said.

"AH," Sirius exclaimed.

"She is right. It's not just curiosity," Remus said, "Well, I guess a little of it is curiosity but mostly they want to help."

Harry knew it was more of Hermione's persistence that anything. Her heart was in the right place but some things couldn't be solved from a book which was where she would look for the answers to whatever the problem was. The Weasley siblings would reluctantly listen to whatever their parents told them unless they heard differently, something Hermione had done. Since Hermione came from a Muggle background, she knew exactly what the beeping

noise was and informed the Weasley children it was monitoring Harry's heart. Out of fear, the teenagers cornered Mrs. Weasley, demanding to know what was wrong with Harry.

"It's not my place to say," Mrs. Weasley had told them. "Remember what Sirius and Remus told you. Harry is still recovering from what happened. If Sirius and Remus feel it is necessary to keep an extra eye on Harry then it is their decision. All of you are guests in their home. It would be best if you remember that."

"Mrs. Weasley is not someone you would want to cross," Sirius said. "She reminds me of your mom James."

"Yeah, which means definitely do not cross," James said sagely.

Mrs. Weasley's attitude had shocked many people. The usually forceful woman had taken a backseat to Sirius and Remus, only putting her word in when the men disagreed about something that involved Harry. The only time her stubbornness really came forth was during meal times. She insisted on helping Harry and Remus cook, something both wizards were more than willing to allow. With so many more mouths to feed the more help they had in the kitchen the better.

The new arrivals had also met Kreacher over the past week. The Black family house elf had also changed quite a bit in the past month. Sirius had told Harry that Kreacher was out of his mind and nothing more than a nuisance

"Exactly!" Sirius cried, "He's mental that elf! He hated me!"

but after the first few days of bed rest, the house elf had entered Harry's bedroom muttering about his mistress. Harry knew from Sirius that Kreacher's mistress was Mrs. Black, Sirius' mother and took it upon himself to ask Kreacher what the woman had been like. This caught Kreacher off guard but since Harry had been adopted by a member of the Black family, Harry was technically a part of the Black family meaning Kreacher had to obey him.

Kreacher had told Harry about Mrs. Black in a way that only an obedient servant could. There were very few witches and wizards in the Black family that opposed Voldemort. Kreacher had grown up in the Black house, believing whatever the Blacks told him no matter how distorted it actually was. Since Sirius had run away from home while he was still at Hogwarts, Kreacher believed that Sirius had betrayed his mother and therefore hated him with a passion. The odd thing was that Kreacher didn't treat Harry in the same fashion. Even though Harry was

against Voldemort, Kreacher treated Harry impartially because Harry was interested to learn about the Black family line.

"See, maybe if you were kinder to him he would be nicer to you," Lily said kindly.

Sirius did not take that kindly and hissed, "That elf is completely bonkers. It's impossible to be nice to him."

"Harry manages," she said back.

"I say this with all the love in the world but Harry is very weird!" Sirius said, Lily rolled her eyes.

That didn't mean Kreacher treated Harry's friends that way. The old house elf had in fact called the Weasleys blood traitors and Hermione a Mudblood (a foul name used against muggle-born witches and wizards).

"See, what did I tell you; mental I say. Mental!" Sirius said triumphantly.

After hearing about it both Harry and Sirius had scolded the house elf, ordering him to stay away from any visitors. Ever since then, Kreacher hadn't really been seen by anyone.

The 'beloved' portrait of Mrs. Black was another part of the Black home that had startled Hermione and the Weasley teenagers. Fred and George had been walking down the stairs talking loudly when to their surprise the curtains on the far wall opened to reveal a portrait of an old woman looking at them angrily before she started shouting at them. This got the attention of everyone in the household.

"Yep, that's mother alright. More pleasant lady you won't find," Sirius said sarcastically.

Mrs. Weasley and Remus were the first to arrive and tried to close the curtains but had no success. Harry and Sirius came running in followed by Ron, Hermione and Ginny. Noticing Harry, Remus pulled a confused Mrs. Weasley out of the way. "That's enough, Grandma!" Harry shouted at her. Having the-boy-who-lived call her that caused the old woman to pass out, allowing Remus to pull the curtains over the portrait.

"Can you read that again?" Sirius said eagerly.

"SIRIUS!" Lily scolded.

"Aw, come on," he whined.

It had been interesting to explain *that* to the Weasleys. When Harry revealed that Mrs. Black wasn't actually his grandmother, Mrs. Weasley let out a sigh of relief. Most of the Order members knew to be quiet around the portrait of Mrs. Black so none of them had seen Harry silence her. Sirius and Remus were trying to silence her the first week Harry had come home and was supposed to be resting. Hearing Mrs. Black's screams, Harry came out of his room and sat down at the top of the staircase watching in confusion. That was when Mrs. Black noticed Harry, staring at him with wide eyes. Harry had heard Sirius call her 'Mum' so Harry just smiled and said 'Hi grandma'. Mrs. Black had fainted allowing Sirius and Remus to close the curtains. Ever since then all it took to shut Mrs. Black up was for Harry to call her grandma since they hadn't been able to remove the portrait from the wall.

"Oh, if mother had a heart she would have a heart attack at knowing I adopted Harry," Sirius said delighted.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"Harry is what purebloods call a half-blood, because you are Muggle-born. Sirius is the heir of the Black Family. He'll be the head of the house and so will his older child, in this case Harry," James explained.

"And as Mrs. Black is so bent on the pureblood ideals, having a Half-blood as future head of the family is worst than the world ending," Remus finished smacking Sirius who was rolling on the bed laughing.

By the end of the week, Harry had come to the conclusion that keeping Hermione and the Weasley teenagers away from the Order meetings was easier said than done. He had warned Sirius about the Extendable Ears during one of his training sessions so precautions had been taken, much to Fred and George's annoyance. Unable to hear anything, the teenagers retired to their rooms for the night, at least that was what they claimed. Too tired to fight about it, Harry went to bed. He had survived a two hour training session that morning and was certainly feeling it now.

"Hey! Stop that!" Sirius cried at being assaulted by flying pillows.

"You're running my baby to the ground," James cried, "He's sick."

"James, Madam Pomfrey told him too," Remus reasoned just to receive a pillow too.

Crawling into bed, Harry could feel the charms cast around the room come to life like they did every night. A soft beeping noise filled his ears as Harry pulled up his covers. Closing his eyes, Harry let his mind wonder like he always did. Focusing on something just kept him up

for hours. Within no time, Harry drifted off, the atmosphere of his bedroom fading into darkness.

The problem was it wasn't a peaceful darkness. Strong emotions seemed to fill the air. There was anger, hate, despair, and rage. Those were the ones Harry could make out. They were so strong it was almost painful. Surrounded by darkness, Harry double checked for his wand holster only to remember that he had taken it off. *Just great. I'm trapped in this...place with no weapon.*

"Trapped where?" Lily asked worried.

"I think that's a vision," Remus said grimly.

"But Voldemort is knocked out," Sirius cried, "Snivellus said so!"

A distant voice broke through the air. Straining to hear, Harry subconsciously took a step towards the voice. If someone else was here then perhaps they knew a way out of wherever he was. *And maybe they're a Death Eater wanting to kill you.* Harry had to groan in annoyance as that idea ran through his head. He had to admit that with the current state of things it was more likely that whoever's voice he heard was an enemy than a friend.

All of a sudden pain seared though Harry's scar forcing him to fall to his knees. Grabbing his head, Harry tried to ignore the pain and focus on the voice that was coming clearer but he couldn't make it out. He started to panic. The only reason his scar could hurt was if Voldemort was nearby or if Harry was having a vision about the Dark Lord but that was impossible. Voldemort was supposed to be in a coma!

Unless this is a dream, Harry realized. *Does this mean Voldemort has woken up?*

"NOOOOOOOO!" the four cried.

If this was indeed a dream then couldn't he just wake up? The pain increased causing Harry to cry out as he held his head. He could feel his heart racing in his chest. How do you wake yourself up especially from something like this? Telling yourself to wake up doesn't work. The voice grew louder, completely surrounding him. It was somewhat distorted but there was definite hint of anger in the voice.

"Revenge...kill...them...all..."

"No! Shut up! You won't kill anyone! I won't let you!" James yelled.

Harry forced himself to rise to his feet and run away from the voice. It sounded too much like the voice he had heard in his second year. He didn't make it far before something slammed into his back, sending him flying forward. Harry landed on the hard floor with a thud. Pain shot through his chest as Harry struggled to breathe. Rolling over onto his back, Harry stared into the blackness, unable to do much else. Slowly the ability to breathe returned but came in short gasps. Ignoring the pain, Harry sat up and came face to face with the last person he expected to see.

Cedric Diggory.

"Oh, poor Harry," Lily cried and James rubbed her back.

Harry stared at the seventeen-year-old in shock, unable to find anything to say. This wasn't possible. Cedric was dead. Harry saw it happen. He saw Crouch use the killing curse that night in the graveyard. *This is a dream...it has to be. This isn't real.* Realizing that Cedric was waiting, Harry took a chance. "Cedric?" he asked nervously.

Cedric smiled. "Hey Harry," he said as he extended a hand and helped Harry to his feet. "You don't belong here. You need to wake up. Your godfather isn't handling your distress too well." Cedric reached out and grasped Harry's shoulder. "Stay strong, Harry."

Lily sobbed and James kept soothing her. Remus smiled sadly and said quietly, "Even in death he looks out for Harry."

Before Harry could respond he felt like he was being pulled out of the darkness. The pain from his chest and scar slowly decreased. Sounds filled his ears. Someone was telling him to wake up as they held him to their chest. Opening his eyes, Harry let out a moan as he moved his left hand and grabbed the sleeve of the person holding him. It took Harry a few moments for his mind to clear and realize that it was Sirius who was holding him.

"Harry?" Sirius asked carefully. "You're awake?"

Harry let out another moan as he nodded slowly. Sirius tightened his hold on Harry as he buried his face in Harry's hair. Harry just remained still, too tired to even think of moving. He wanted nothing more than to fall back asleep but found that he was being held in a fairly uncomfortable position. His upper body was twisted so that his godfather's knee was digging into his rib.

Remus rubbed Sirius' back. He didn't make any comments; he knew how his friend got when someone he loved was hurt. The first time Remus let Sirius and the others see him after the full moon Sirius was beside himself with worry and would hover over Remus asking if he needed anything. It was a bit annoying but very heart warming.

"Sirius, please let him go," Remus said quietly. "Madam Pomfrey needs to check Harry over. She needs to check his heart."

That was all it took for Sirius to relax his hold and lower Harry down on the bed only to grab Harry's hand and hold it instead. Harry's eyes were partially open as Madam Pomfrey's blurry form came into view. She waved her wand over Harry a few times, focusing on his chest. Harry knew the routine by now. Whatever had happened must have set off the charms that had been placed around his room.

No wonder Sirius was so distraught.

Once Madam Pomfrey was done, she pulled up the covers to his chest and rested a hand on Harry's forehead. "Remarkably there is no further damage to Mr. Potter's heart," she announced. "Other than a slight case of exhaustion, I can't find any ailments."

"Good," James whispered relieved.

Sirius let out the breath he had been holding. Harry opened his eyes a little more to see a blurry Remus sit down on the edge of the bed by Harry's head and try to smooth out Harry's messy short hair. It was a hopeless act but it was clear that Remus wasn't really doing it because Harry's hair needed to be straightened. Like Sirius, Remus needed a reminder that Harry was fine and still breathing.

"He's okay Moony," Sirius said calming his friend.

"Very well," said the voice of Professor Dumbledore. "Sirius, Remus, I trust you two will hear about the rest of the meeting from another source." When Sirius and Remus nodded in response, Dumbledore left the room followed by everyone else who had remained by the door.

The moment the door closed both Sirius and Remus seemed to crumble. Sirius leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Harry's chest while Remus leaned forward and buried his face in Harry's hair. With Harry's free hand he wrapped his arm around Sirius and started to slowly rub his godfather's back. He remembered Remus' words: *'I've never been so scared in all my*

life'. Harry couldn't imagine what Sirius and Remus had gone through when the alarms went off so he just let them be as he slowly drifted off.

"If Harry keeps this up, Moony won't be the only one with grey hair," James said wisely to Lily and ducked to dodge two pillows.

Harry had learned by now that sometimes it was best to let Sirius and Remus work through whatever they were feeling on their own because he was bound to hear about it tomorrow...and the next day...and the day after that...and the day after that...

"Yeah, well. That's what you get for scaring the day light out of us!" Sirius said affronted crossing his arms.

The following morning was tense to say the least. For the first time since the holidays began, Mrs. Weasley had prepared breakfast alone. No one spoke of what had happened the night before, much to the annoyance of Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George. They had heard the alarms followed by several Order members running past their rooms to Harry's. They poked their heads out of their rooms to see Bill running back to the stairs while Sirius' shouts filled their ears, begging Harry to wake up.

They had hurried back in their rooms when they heard Bill hurrying up the stairs with someone following him. They came out again at the sound of Harry's screaming. Fred and George had to hold Ron and Hermione back from running to Harry's room as the screaming ceased. They had never heard Harry scream so loudly or so full of pain before. Mrs. Weasley entered the hallway a moment later and ushered them to bed, claiming that everything was under control. They went into their rooms but no one went to bed.

"Yes, well. You can't expect them to sleep after that!" Lily cried.

"Must have been quite frightening," James nodded.

It was almost nearly a quarter of an hour later when they heard footsteps and soft voices move past their doors. They heard nothing else for the rest of the night and nothing about it the following morning. Breakfast was a silent affair with most of the adults who seemed to find their coffee and tea cups extremely interesting. Ron had even asked about the night before out of frustration. After an uncomfortable silence, Mrs. Weasley informed the

teenagers that Harry had a nightmare but wouldn't say anything more other than to tell the teenagers to give Harry and his guardians some space today.

That didn't settle well with Ron and Hermione. The entire Order of the Phoenix doesn't rush into your bedroom for a simple nightmare. Madam Pomfrey isn't called for a simple nightmare. Something was wrong with Harry. It would explain why Sirius and Remus were so protective but why didn't Harry say anything? Didn't Harry trust them anymore?

"Oh, it's not that," Lily said sadly.

"Harry just relies on his guardians now," Remus said, "Everyone does. You don't tell Harry every problem you have. Your parents deal with that."

"I guess they're used to being the ones Harry comes to and now they feel left out," James said knowingly.

Entering the kitchen for lunch, Ron and Hermione stopped in their tracks when they saw Mrs. Weasley and Remus placing some food on a tray while talking quietly. Remus looked exhausted making Ron and Hermione wonder if he slept at all last night.

"Are you sure he's all right?" Mrs. Weasley asked softly. "When he started screaming..."

"It was scary, I know," Remus said as he rubbed his eyes. "Harry doesn't really know what happened. He said his scar hurting was the reason he screamed. Harry has a very high tolerance for pain. I don't want to think about how much it must have hurt to justify him crying out. I already sent word to Dumbledore. If Voldemort—" Mrs. Weasley and Ron flinched, "—has awakened then Harry will be in more danger than we could ever imagine."

"And Sirius?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Remus shook his head. "Sirius refuses to leave Harry's side," he admitted. "I think we may need to slip him something to keep him from going with Harry to Hogwarts.

"Hum, that's a good idea," Sirius said tapping his chin with his finger, "I think Harry could use a pet."

"He already has an owl," Lily said annoyed.

"We can work around that," Sirius shrugged. Lily huffed.

We thought this was over. We had worked so hard on making Harry see that Cedric's death wasn't his fault." Seeing Mrs. Weasley's confusion Remus took a deep breath to calm himself down. "Cedric was in Harry's nightmare last night. That was probably what was the hardest for him to deal with. It's hard to see someone in your dreams then wake up and remember they're dead."

Mrs. Weasley covered her mouth in shock as tears filled her eyes. "That poor dear," she said in a wavering voice. "He's been through so much. I never thought it was this bad. I'll take care of everything today. You and Sirius spend the day with Harry. If you need anything, anything at all let me or one of the children know. Will Poppy be stopping by today?"

Remus nodded. "She wants to be absolutely sure there is no further damage that could prolong his recovery," he said as he picked up the tray. "Harry claims he's fine, of course. I swear Harry is so much like his parents it isn't funny. We had to tie James to the bed in the hospital wing after a Quidditch injury so he could be healed.

James whistled and Remus and Sirius glared at him.

"I have no idea what he is talking about," James told Lily, "So I am not too fond of Pomfrey. Who can blame me?"

Lily would just deny anything was wrong with her. We had to literally drag her to St. Mungo's because she had been so sick only to find out that she was pregnant with Harry."

Lily huffed, "I don't deny. It's just that I never get sick."

"Huh, huh," Sirius said, "That's why Mary had to drag you to Madam Pomfrey last year because you were shivering like mad and you could cook an egg on your head. 'No Marry I'm fine. Atchoo. Atchoo'," Sirius mocked. He received the patented Evans' glare of Death.

Mrs. Weasley smiled at Remus only to have it fade when she noticed two teenagers standing in the doorway. She nudged Remus then nodded at the door. "How much did you two hear?" she asked as Remus turned to see Ron and Hermione.

"Enough," Ron said through his teeth as he glared at Remus and his mother. "What's wrong with Harry? Why won't anyone tell us? Why is it such a big secret? We care for Harry too!"

Remus let out a sigh and put the tray down. "We know that," he said calmly. "Harry didn't want you knowing because he didn't want you to treat him like he was going to die any

moment.” He noticed the eyes of the teenagers widen at the comment. “Which he isn’t,” Remus added quickly.

“Smooth Moony,” James snickered.

“The duel with Voldemort—” he ignored the flinches that came from Ron and Mrs. Weasley, “—caused more damage to Harry more than we originally thought. He’s getting better but slowly. Right now his heart can’t take a lot of stress which was why you heard the alarms last night. They were set to warn us whenever his heart rate reaches a certain mark.”

“So what happened last night has happened before?” Hermione asked fearfully.

“A few times,” Remus admitted as he picked up the tray of food again. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a teenager and a man who believes he’s a teenager waiting for their lunch.”

James, Lily and Remus laughed.

Sirius looked at them indifferently and drawled, “So I am and always will be a young spirit. That’s why I don’t go grey like some people!” Remus stopped laughing and hit Sirius with a pillow.

Ron and Hermione moved out of the way so Remus could leave the kitchen. As he carefully walked up the stairs, Remus tried to think of a way to break it to Harry that his friends had found out. He had known it was only a matter of time before Ron and Hermione found out that things weren’t as ‘fine’ as Harry let them believe but Remus had hoped Harry would have been the one telling them.

Entering Harry’s room, Remus had to smile at the site of Harry lying in bed with his eyes closed as he mindlessly pet ‘Midnight’. The large black dog had his head rested on Harry’s stomach allowing Harry better access to scratch his ears. Remus had to shake his head. It was amazing how Sirius knew exactly what Harry needed without being told.

“I am very wise,” Sirius beamed.

“And such modestly too,” Lily mocked, “I don’t know how come he didn’t become priest with such qualities.” Remus and James couldn’t hold the laughter any longer.

Remus moved over to Harry’s bed, startling both ‘Midnight’ and Harry out of their thoughts. With a *pop*, Sirius was sitting on Harry’s bed instead of ‘Midnight’ with an eager look on his face. “Food!” Sirius said happily.

"Thirty-four year old teenager," Remus snorted.

"Young at heart, Moony. Young at heart," Sirius said wisely.

"I take it Molly is the cook for today?"

"Hence the overabundance of food," Remus said as he set the tray down and handed a plate and fork to Sirius. "Do you feel up for eating, Harry?"

Although Harry wasn't really hungry he knew Sirius and Remus wouldn't let him skip a meal because of it. "I'll try to eat a little," he said as he propped himself against his headboard. "How is everything down there?"

Remus handed Harry a plate then pulled up a chair and sat down before taking his own plate of food. "Well, it's pretty quiet to tell you the truth," he said at last. "I didn't see the twins or Ginny so I don't know what they're up to." He took a bite and glanced at Sirius nervously, something that Sirius noticed. "I did run into Ron and Hermione though."

Harry also noticed the glances shared between the Marauders and let out a sigh of disappointment.

"You know Moony. I haven't got a clue how you can keep your furry little problem a secret," James pondered.

"Meaning?" Remus narrowed his eyes.

"Meaning," Sirius started ticking things off with his fingers, "You're a bad liar. You give things away just by looking at you. I mean honestly, when Minnie asked who had set the Filibuster Fireworks in the library did you have to look at me?" he finished hands on his hips.

"Oops," Remus shrugged sheepishly.

"They found out, didn't they?" he asked softly as his gaze fell. "They know about all of this."

Remus set his plate of food down and scooted his chair closer to the bed. He reached out and gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Yes, they know about your heart condition," he admitted. "They overheard me talking to Molly and demanded answers. I didn't tell them everything, just enough to settle their curiosity for now." Not receiving an answer, Remus

decided to continue. "Cub, they're worried about you. They heard the alarms go off last night. They heard you scream. What are they supposed to do? Forget about it?"

Harry stared down at his plate of food, unable to meet the gazes of his guardians. He knew they were bound to find out sooner or later. He had just wished it would have been later when he wasn't being monitored so closely. They were going to overreact just like everyone else. "What am I going to say to them?" Harry asked.

"I would suggest the truth," Remus offered gently, "at least about your heart condition since they already know it exists. You will have to decide what to tell them from there on. You know how we feel about this, cub, but you have to do what's right for you. You trust us but we won't be there at Hogwarts with you, Ron and Hermione will. Ron would be able to help you at night if you have a nightmare."

"If Padfoot goes then-"

"SIRIUS! You will not go as Harry's pet," Lily scolded. Sirius pouted.

Harry let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "But what if they tell someone?" he asked quietly. "I don't want the entire school finding out that I can't sleep through the night on my own because my heart might give out. Secrets don't remain secrets at Hogwarts. Nothing about me remains a secret at Hogwarts."

"So you're going to let your fear of something that may or may not happen decide your life?" Sirius asked. "I hate to admit it, Pronglet, but Moony does have a point."

Remus put his hands on his hips and raised an eyebrow to Sirius.

"Well, it's bad enough you're usually right and you want us to *admit* it?" Sirius cried affronted, James nodded vigorously.

We can't physically be there at Hogwarts with you—unless, of course, something happens and we'll be there before you know it." Remus cleared his throat alerting Sirius that he was getting off track.

"Padfoot does that a lot," James explained to Lily.

"I know," she chuckled, "Professor Slughorn asked me to tutor him last year after he managed to tell all his love life on an essay about the *Amortentia* Potion."

"I have no idea why he didn't appreciate it," Sirius huffed.

"Er—what I mean is we can't physically be there but your friends can. If they knew how important it was to keep this a secret from Voldemort then they would probably be more careful not to say anything."

There was a soft knock at the door, startling all three of them. The conversation ceased as the door slowly opened followed by Ron and Hermione poking their heads in. "Er—is it okay if we talk to Harry for a little bit?" Ron asked nervously as he and Hermione stood in the doorway. "We promise not to upset him."

Sirius and Remus glanced at Harry before grabbing their plates and standing up at the same time. It was almost like a conversation without words passed between the two men by a simple look. "We'll be right outside," Sirius said to Ron and Hermione with a hint of warning to his voice. "If the alarms go off you two will not be allowed anywhere near Harry for the remainder of the holidays."

Ron and Hermione nodded nervously as they moved out of the way so Sirius and Remus could leave. As soon as the door closed, an uncomfortable silence filled the room. Both sides had plenty to say but were unsure of how to start the conversation. "So how are you feeling?" Hermione asked at last.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Better," he said honestly. "I'm still tired for some reason. Sirius and Remus have ordered bed rest for the day. I guess I really scared them last night. I really thought this entire mess was over with. I haven't had a bad nightmare in a few weeks."

Hermione was the first to move and sat down on the foot of Harry's bed with Ron following her. "But you still have nightmares?" she asked gently. From the look on Hermione's face Harry could tell she was fighting with her curiosity. "Are—are they about what happened?" Hermione asked softly.

Harry nodded as he looked away. "There is no way either of you could possibly know what it was like that night," he said softly. "I was sure I was going to die, just like Cedric. The things I saw...the things he did will probably haunt me for the rest of my life. Dueling with someone like Voldemort—" Ron flinched but Harry ignored it, "—is not something I would recommend. Sirius and Remus have helped me a lot but I can tell they still see the fourteen-year-old that came back that night, battered and near death. I know I'm not completely healthy yet but I

couldn't stand if my friends were to look at me that way too. I am getting stronger. It's just taking longer than I thought it would."

"I'm sure they won't," James said.

Lily snorted, "You're very naïve James."

Ron's gaze fell to the duvet. "What happened?" he asked quietly. There was no question to what Ron was talking about. He was asking what happened to make everyone act like Harry was so fragile.

"I had a nightmare one night and started screaming," Harry answered evenly. "Sirius and Remus came in and tried to wake me up but couldn't. My heart couldn't handle the stress and went into shock. It stopped beating for almost ten minutes, according to Madam Pomfrey. That's why there are so many charms and spells in here, to keep it from happening again...which it hasn't. I take a potion every morning and other than a few light episodes I've been fine. You do understand that no one can find out about this, right?"

Ron and Hermione nodded. "We won't say anything, Harry," Hermione said confidently. "You can trust us." For a moment it looked like Hermione was pondering on whether to ask a question or not. Her curiosity won out once again. "Is You-Know-Who really in a coma, Harry?" she asked. "Fred and George overheard something like that with their Extendable Ears."

Harry let out a tired sigh then nodded. "That's partially the reason I'm not allowed to leave the house," he said as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "The Order thinks Voldemort's supporters will try to grab me to find out 'what I did to their master' which is hogwash." That of course was a lie since Harry knew from his conversations with Dumbledore that the coma was because of the magical outbursts he had experienced while dueling the Dark Lord but telling Ron and Hermione about the outbursts was a discussion Harry really wasn't ready for. "I didn't do anything to him."

Remus shook his head and put it in his hand, "Harry, don't lie to them."

"S'okay Moony. Some things you have to learn by yourself no matter what others say," James said calmly.

"Well, we can understand why you didn't tell us, Harry," Ron said sounding a little overwhelmed by everything he had learned. "I probably wouldn't want to talk about it either. So...what can we do to help? I mean, I know we can't...well..."

"I know what you mean, Ron," Harry said with a smile. He had to admit that he missed talking openly with his friends like this without having to worry about saying something wrong. "I guess I really need you two to just treat me normally. Everyone treating me like I'm made of glass only reminds me that something's wrong. I don't need to be reminded of it twenty-four hours a day."

"We can do that," Hermione said with a nod. "But you know they're only treating you like that because they care, don't you?"

For the second time a knock on the door ended all conversations. The three teenagers turned their heads to see the door opening followed by Madam Pomfrey entering followed by Sirius and Remus. She was carrying a small bag that Harry was quite familiar with. Inside that bag were a variety of potions and nearly every one of them tasted horrible. Harry had learned quite a few tricks to dampen the taste but he still tasted enough of them.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked as she set her bag on his bedside table. She noticed his plate that had very little eaten off of it. "I see your lack of appetite is back. Is there anything else? Chest pain? Muscle spasms? Headache? Difficulty breathing?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm just a little tired," he admitted. Since he had been seeing the woman at least once a week he knew better than to lie to her. She always seemed to know when you were lying. *Or maybe I'm just a bad liar*, Harry mused.

"No Harry, she is evil, I tell you. Evil!" James cried. Lily patted his shoulder.

"That is understandable, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said as she pulled out her wand and waved it over Harry. After a few moments she put her wand away and opened her bag. "It seems that last night was only a minor episode. You are quite fortunate there is no further damage. I trust you have already taken your potion?"

Harry nodded as he watched her pull out a few vials of different colored potions. Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see Ron and Hermione shifting around nervously at the foot of Harry's bed. They obviously didn't like the fact that what happened last night was considered

minor. Glancing at Sirius and Remus, Harry couldn't help but notice how tired they looked, making him wonder if they had slept at all last night. ***Probably not. They were most likely afraid something would happen if they did.***

"Don't worry about us cub," Remus said, "We'll be fine."

"For now, Mr. Potter, I suggest you take it easy for the rest of the day," Madam Pomfrey said breaking into Harry's thoughts. "I will leave a dreamless sleep potion for you to take tonight; you know the routine by now. I'll leave tomorrow's activities up to your guardians." She looked over her shoulder at Sirius and Remus for a moment before returning her gaze to Harry. "There are also few calming draughts, a muscle relaxant potion and a few more doses of your prescribed potion. Don't be afraid to use them if you need them, Mr. Potter."

"Yes ma'am," Harry said with a nod as Madam Pomfrey closed her bag and picked it up. He had no intention of using the extra potions but he wasn't about to tell her that. The last thing he wanted was to become dependent on potions with school starting in less than a month. He really couldn't take a potion in front of everyone there. That would be clear indication that something was wrong.

James fell backwards on the floor and slapped his forehead, "Why, why is he so stubborn?"

"Genetics?" Sirius asked.

He received two very evil glares.

Once Madam Pomfrey bid farewell and left, Remus approached Harry and took the plate out of Harry's hands. Looking up at Moony, Harry saw a reassuring smile before the man motioned for Harry to lie down. "I'm sure you two can talk more with Harry later," Remus said to Ron and Hermione as Harry's head hit the pillow. "Right now he needs to rest."

Ron and Hermione also bid farewell and left. Watching the door close, Harry couldn't help but feel somewhat relieved. They had taken it better than Harry thought they would. He thought they would be angry and hurt that he had kept something from them. He had expected for Ron and Hermione to demand to know everything that happened. As he closed his eyes Harry had to wonder how well he actually knew his friends. They seemed so different from the people he had known only a month ago. Maybe he wasn't the only person who had changed.

"Probably not," Lily said, "Seeing Harry hurt like that must have changed them."

Big Thanks to all of you who take the time to read this and special thanks to the ones that review also.

Don't own any of this.

Chapter 4

Constant Reminders

For the next few weeks it took an extreme amount of effort for Harry to convince everyone that he was fine. His training had resumed after a few days of 'recovering' but Sirius seemed to be extremely laid back with everything. He didn't push Harry and always seemed to call and end to the training the moment he saw a drop of sweat appear on Harry's forehead. This was aggravating for someone who wanted to progress but Harry kept his mouth shut for now. Sirius was worried. Harry accepted that. He would let it go for now but if it continued much longer Harry was prepared to do something about it.

"Such a worrywart," James said fondly ruffling Sirius' hair. He quickly scrambled off the bed and back to his spot at Sirius' glare of doom. Not to be mistaken with the glare of death, this one promised pain.

"Do not touch the hair," he hissed slowly.

Ron and Hermione had tried to act normal around Harry but anyone could see they were worried about their friend.

"I don't like to say it but; told you!" Lily smirked.

"Lily! You love to say it," Sirius chuckled.

Their interest in the Order had suddenly vanished, making Fred, George and Ginny slightly suspicious but Hermione usually had an excuse every time the three Weasley teenagers voiced their thoughts. To settle their curiosity, Mrs. Weasley had told her children (with Sirius and Remus' approval of course) that Harry was prone to violent nightmares with everything that had happened. From what anyone could tell they accepted this explanation and stopped asking questions although if they actually believed their mother was no one really knew.

As the time to go back to Hogwarts drew near, all of the teenagers grew nervous (Hermione especially). No one had received their school letter yet. Sirius had been so annoyed with Hermione's complaining about 'the lack of time to prepare for classes' that he had gotten the

book list from Professor Dumbledore and picked up what the teenagers would need, much to the Weasley children's annoyance. Ever since then Harry and Ron reluctantly spent their free time with Hermione in the Black family library.

Sirius had also picked up a few extra books about the study of magic for Harry which he read either late at night or early in the morning before Ron and Hermione were up.

Remus shook his head, "Tsk, tsk Sirius. How the mighty have fallen. Lily, James, Help!"

Lily and James hurried to pull Sirius who was tackling Remus with a pillow off of him.

The study in magic itself wasn't a part of the Hogwarts curriculum so it was a possibility that Hermione hadn't already read about the topic, a slight possibility but a possibility nonetheless.

It was the last day of the holidays when the letters finally arrived. Harry was preparing lunch with Remus and Mrs. Weasley when Ron and Hermione ran into the kitchen with envelopes in their hands. Ron quickly handed over Harry's letter before tearing his own open. Hermione already had hers open and started screaming when something red and gold fell into her hand. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Hermione had been made a Prefect.

"Of course. Prefect Hermione," Sirius sighed, "That was a given."

"Now she's going to be all bossy and want them to follow the rules," James groaned.

"There is nothing wrong with Hermione upholding her responsibilities as a Prefect," Lily scolded.

"Yeah, you would think that," James mumbled.

"What was that?" she asked narrowing her eyes.

"Nothing sweet Lily," James said, "Nothing at all."

Crack.

Fred and George Apparated into the kitchen with worried looks on their faces. "What's all the commotion about?" asked George then saw Hermione holding her badge. "Oh, and here we thought something important happened."

"George!" Mrs. Weasley scolded. "Becoming a Prefect *is* important." She turned to Hermione. "Congratulations dear. You certainly have earned it with all of the hard work you've done over the years."

Hermione smiled at Mrs. Weasley then looked at Harry with an eager look on her face. "Congratulations Hermione," Harry echoed with a smile then glanced over at Ron who seemed to be staring at his Hogwarts letter in shock. "Er—Ron? Are you okay?"

Ron slowly looked up at Harry with wide eyes. "I'm a Prefect," he said in almost a whisper. "How—how's that possible?"

"WHAT?" the four yelled.

"But, but, but, Harry...Ron... Harry..." Sirius gasped lost.

"After all the hard work Harry's done they go and make Ron a prefect. What's that about?" James cried angry.

"I didn't think you wanted Harry to be a Prefect James," Lily said evenly.

"It's not that!" James said annoyed, "It's just that Harry worked hard and Ron, well Ron is kind of like Padfoot and me. You didn't see us being made prefects did you? No, Moony was, 'cause he's the hard worker."

It seemed that Ron wasn't the only one who was surprised. Fred snatched the letter out of Ron's hand and quickly read it over. "I don't believe it," he said as he looked at Harry. "We thought you were a guarantee, Harry, with you winning the Tournament and everything you've done."

"You weren't the only one," Remus said.

Harry winced at the topic of the Tournament and felt Remus' reassuring hand instantly on his shoulder. There were only two Prefects per House announced for fifth year students. To say Harry was surprised that Ron had been chosen was an understatement. Despite everything he had done, Harry had made the effort the past two years to work hard and had managed to improve on his grades while Ron barely managed to pass his classes.

"See, my point exactly!" James said pointing at the book.

Realizing that everyone was waiting for him to say something, Harry did some quick thinking. Saying the wrong thing would either make Ron angry or jealous. Harry wasn't about to do that. "I really don't think I'm prefect material," he said nonchalantly as he set his unopened letter down and resumed to preparing lunch. "I can't even take care of myself right now. I'm sure Dumbledore had that in mind when he made the assignments." Looking directly at Ron, Harry flashed him a proud smile. "Congratulations Ron," he said sincerely.

"Poor Harry. He isn't even allowed to be disappointed in peace" Lily sighed.

Everyone instantly avoided looking at Harry. Fred was feeling horrible for bringing up the Tournament since it was still something Harry refused to talk about while everyone else was searching for something to say. These were two very touchy topics: The Tournament and Harry's ailing heart. Remus, Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Hermione all knew how much Harry resented the fact that he wasn't completely healthy yet. This just seemed to be another nail in the coffin, another reminder that everything wasn't as 'fine' as Harry wanted everyone to believe.

"You think that's why Dumbledore chose Ron?" Sirius asked.

"Makes sense," Lily answered, "Maybe Harry will still need his rest and having Prefect duties on top of classes and Quidditch won't help. But still. It sucks!"

Feeling the tension in the room, Harry turned to the four teenagers with a knife in his hand. "If you four want to help I'm sure we can find something for you to do," he offered then watched as his friends quickly departed, Ron receiving a fierce hug from Mrs. Weasley before he was able to. They had all learned by now just to leave Harry, Remus and Mrs. Weasley to manage the meals since they nearly had it down to a science.

"I bet Moony has a chart put up with who does what and everything," James sniggered.

"Hey! I am not that obsessive!" Remus cried.

"Of course not!" Sirius said patting Remus as Remus smirked at James. Then turning to the other two Sirius said in a staged whisper, "The Healer said not to disagree with him."

Remus repeatedly hit Sirius with a pillow.

As soon as they left Harry turned his back to Remus and Mrs. Weasley and continued preparing lunch. He knew Sirius would be coming momentarily and the three adults would

want to talk about this, something he really didn't want to do at this point. Harry couldn't help but feel a little disappointed that Professor Dumbledore didn't believe he was capable for the responsibilities that came with being a Prefect. He thought he had made a lot of progress from the beginning of the holidays at least that was what everyone was telling him.

"Are you all right, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked gently.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said sincerely. He couldn't help but feel guilty that Ron's mother was worried about him rather than celebrating with her son. This was another reminder that people still thought he was made of glass. "We should probably do something special for dinner tonight," Harry added after a moment's silence. "Ron and Hermione definitely deserve it."

"You're right Harry," Remus said carefully. "They deserve a special dinner."

Remus received three glares and decided to build a little wall of pillows to protect himself.

The sound of the door opening quickly alerted Harry that Sirius had just entered the kitchen. "Would someone care to tell me why I was just cornered by Fred and George and told to come here as soon as possible?" Sirius asked curiously.

"The school letters just arrived," Remus said softly. "We were just discussing what should be done for dinner tonight to celebrate Ron and Hermione being named Prefects." Sirius looked at Remus and Mrs. Weasley with a raised eyebrow. "You heard me correctly, Sirius," Remus added.

Sirius shook his head slowly before turning his gaze to Harry. "Pronglet, sit down," he said as he pulled out a chair and sat down. Harry reluctantly complied. "Now, talk to us. I can tell that you're disappointed." Harry moved to object. "It's okay to feel that way, kiddo, but we have to talk about this. You can't afford to bury your emotions. Remember what happened last year."

"At least someone is asking Harry how he feels," James grunted.

"I was being diplomatic back there," Remus said defensively. He stacked one more pillow to his little wall at the glare James gave him.

Mrs. Weasley looked at Sirius and Remus in confusion. She was the only one who didn't know of Harry's emotional outbursts. While there had only been two, the second one had certainly

been more disastrous than the first. Unable to deal with his pent up emotions anymore, Harry had vented his feelings and caused every window in the hospital wing to shatter. That was one of the main reasons Sirius and Remus were so persistent in Harry working through his feelings after the Tournament and anything else that might be bothering him.

Harry let out a sigh as his gaze fell to the table. He didn't want to admit that he was feeling anything but happiness for his friends but that just wasn't the case. "I'm disappointed," he admitted softly. "I worked so hard last year with everything going on I thought he would have seen that I could handle it." Harry shook his head. He knew it was wrong to feel sorry for himself like this. "I should be happy for Ron," he said more to himself than to anyone in the room. "He deserves some recognition. He's wanted it for so long."

"And so have you," Remus said gently as he knelt down at Harry's side.

"Finally!" James cried. With a little smile Remus began to confidently dismantle his wall.

"We know how hard you pushed yourself last year. I know how hard you pushed yourself the year before that. You *have* made progress in your recovery, cub; more progress than anyone could know. You're not a bad person for feeling disappointed. You have every right to be. Acknowledge the feeling and move on. Don't dwell on what could have been."

"Yes Harry don't do that," Lily said wisely, "For instance I don't dwell on how your father could have *not* set dungbombs on that potions class our first year. Or how he could have *not* set the suit of armors to say rude things as you passed on second year or how he could have *not* changed all the teachers hairs to purple our fourth year or-"

"You know Lily for someone that doesn't dwell you have an awful good memory," Sirius chuckled she glared at him.

"Moony's right," Sirius added. "You do have a lot on your plate now. Don't worry about it. Your father wasn't a Prefect either."

"And damn proud of it!" James said puffing his chest.

I'm sure Dumbledore thought you didn't need the added stress at the moment. Remember, this is your OWL year. You wanted to do well in your studies and on the Quidditch field—if Poppy will allow it of course. Concentrate on what you have, Harry, not what you don't."

Harry looked at his guardians with a hopeful look on his face. They were right. Remus had told Harry how hard this year was going to be and with Quidditch he really couldn't afford to be spread too thin. Madam Pomfrey certainly wouldn't allow it. As much as he hated that he wasn't healthy, Harry knew he needed to accept it.

"You're not disappointed?" Harry asked softly.

Sirius and Remus both stared at Harry with confused looks on their faces. "Disappointed?" Sirius asked sounding horrified. "Harry, I was never in the running to be a Prefect. Good ol' Moony had that *honor*."

"It is an honor," Lily hissed glaring at Sirius who was perfectly unfazed.

Sirius moved to Harry's side and pulled the teenager into a fierce embrace. "Don't ever think we're disappointed in you. We are so proud to be your guardians. You have accomplished more in the short time we've known you than we could ever hope for."

Harry had to smile. Disappointing his guardians was something that always plagued his mind. They were the main reason he pushed himself so hard. Before Sirius and Remus were given guardianship of him, Harry really never had anyone who cared how he did in school. The Dursleys certainly didn't care. Usually when Harry did better than Dudley in school he was beaten up by Dudley and his gang.

As Sirius let go Harry found himself pulled into another embrace by Remus. "Being a Prefect is an honor but it's not all it's cracked up to be," Remus said bluntly. "You have to enforce rules onto others without appearing to be abusing your position, especially when you are disciplining students from other houses. It is certainly an added stress; at least it was for me."

Sirius launched himself at Remus hugging him, "Moony, you never said you were stressed. Just relax, let the students be." Remus rolled his eyes.

"Yes, live and let live," James said grinning, "Stress is prejudicial to your health Moony. No wonder your hair is all grey in the book."

"My hair is not *all* grey!" Remus cried indignantly, "It says that my hair is brown with grey streaks not all grey!"

"Same difference," James said waving his hand.

Already convinced that the right decision concerning Prefects was made, Harry thanked his guardians before finishing the preparations for lunch while discussing what should be done for Ron and Hermione. Mrs. Weasley wanted to buy something special for Ron like she had for Percy when he had become a Prefect and went off to ask Ron what he wanted while Harry, Remus and Sirius put everything on the table.

Glancing at his guardians, Harry had to admit that there were more important things than a badge and added responsibilities. He already knew it was going to be difficult with Voldemort coming back and the Ministry not believing it. He meant what he said. It was about time Ron was received something that Harry didn't have.

Ron did have some problems with jealousy in the past and although Ron claimed to have moved past them, Harry could tell that it was more of the case that he didn't voice them anymore. Ever since the third task, Ron had been extremely careful with what he said to Harry. It was almost like Ron was afraid to say or do anything that could possibly cause a rift in their friendship. *Perhaps seeing me in the hospital wing for nearly a week had a bigger affect on him than I thought.* Harry knew he would have to have a talk with Ron sooner or later.

As it turned out Ron asked Mrs. Weasley for a new broom, the new Cleansweep to be more precise. Sirius had offered to help Mrs. Weasley with the cost but she refused, claiming that Sirius had already paid for their school books and had saved the Weasleys plenty of money as it was. Harry knew it was more of the fact that Mrs. Weasley was too proud to accept any more charity than what Sirius had already provided.

It was late afternoon before Mrs. Weasley left for Diagon Alley while Harry, Remus and Sirius prepared for dinner. Fred, George and Ginny were told to keep Ron and Hermione busy until dinner. Harry was doing everything in his power to make this special for them and didn't want the surprise ruined. Once in a while Ginny would enter the kitchen and give Harry an update which was mostly of how Fred and George were teasing Ron about having to abide by the rules now. Harry had to smile at the thought of Ron following the rules. That was certainly going to be a challenge.

Remus huffed.

"Remus?" Lily asked worried.

"I don't see why Fred and George have to tease poor Ron," he said to her.

Lily looked at the sniggering black haired Marauders and turned to Remus, "I am sorry your friends are idiots and teased you Moony."

"Hey! We're not idiots!" James cried.

"Yeah! It's not our fault Moony provides us such good entertainment material!" Sirius said defensively.

By the time Mrs. Weasley returned Harry, Remus and Sirius had everything ready, including a banner with 'CONGRATUALTIONS RON AND HERMIONE' written on it. Mrs. Wealsey congratulated the three wizards on a job well done before leaving the room to find her children and Hermione. She returned a few minutes later with everyone except Ron who was currently putting his new broom in his room.

As soon as Ron arrived, everyone started eating while talking excitedly about the start of the school term tomorrow. Ron and Hermione quickly found Harry and thanked him repeatedly for going through so much trouble. Harry just pushed it off as no big deal before congratulating Ron and Hermione again. He had to admit that he hadn't seen either of them this happy in a long time.

Mr. Weasley and Bill arrived shortly after everyone started eating followed by Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody. Every single one of the congratulated Ron and Hermione as Sirius sat down to Harry's right while Remus sat down to Harry's left. Harry didn't even notice them since his attention was on Ron and Hermione. It wasn't until a hand touched his right shoulder that Harry realized someone was sitting next to him.

"Are you all right, Pronglet?" Sirius asked quietly.

Harry looked at his godfather with a soft smile on his face and nodded before returning his gaze to Ron and Hermione. "Look at them," he said just as quietly. "They're so happy. They deserve to be happy especially after everything that's happened."

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and gave the teen a one-armed embrace. "They aren't the only ones," he said softly. "This was a really great idea you had, Harry. You never cease to amaze me."

"No you don't Pronglet. It's such a wonder. With that git as a father how can you be such a great kid? You obviously take after your Godfather," Sirius said pointing at James with his thumb. James glared at him and Remus just pointed out.

"That's a genetic impossibility Padfoot."

"HA!" James cried.

"You never know James. You never know," Sirius teased.

"Excuse me," Lily said narrowing her eyes, "Are you insinuating I would have an affair with *you*, of all people."

"What can I say," Sirius sighed, "I am irresistible."

Remus did not move to help as Sirius was pelted by two pillows.

Harry shrugged off the comment. He really didn't understand why Sirius was making such a big deal out of this. "They would do the same for me," he said truthfully. "They were there to support me last year." Well, once Ron dealt with his jealousy but there was no point in bringing that up again. Ron had apologized and even taught Harry how to swim. "Why shouldn't I support them?"

"Right you are Harry," James said proudly.

Mad-Eye Moody's voice broke into their conversation. "Dumbledore must have a lot of faith in the two of you," he growled at Ron and Hermione. "Those in positions of authority are always attacked first. I trust the two of you know how to defend yourselves properly and know proper wand care. Can't have you blasting off your buttocks now can we?"

"Uhm, that's encouraging," Lily said sarcastically.

"Yes, we better start watching our backs on rounds Lily," Remus chuckled.

"Want a watch dog?" Sirius asked grinning.

"NO!" they both cried.

Harry had to bite back a laugh at the nervous looks on Ron and Hermione's faces. Mad-Eye had given him a similar speech before he found out Harry had a wand holster for his right

wrist. It was usual for teenagers to place their wands in their back pants pocket since they had no better place to put them. Mad-Eye had gone over the ignored guidelines of wand care in detail that day.

Mundungus Fletcher arrived a short time later and instantly sat down by Fred and George. The three of them talking quietly was certainly not a good sign. Harry had a feeling that Fred and George were using Mundungus for his shady connections for materials to help their joke shop, something he knew Mrs. Weasley wouldn't be pleased to find out about.

Mr. Weasley stood up with a goblet in his hand. "A toast!" he declared as he raised his goblet. "To Ron and Hermione, the new Gryffindor Prefects!"

Everyone echoed Mr. Weasley as they raised their goblets then took a drink. Both Ron and Hermione blushed as they smiled brightly and took a sip out of their goblets as well. As everyone set their goblets down, applause broke out only making Ron and Hermione's blushes increase. Harry clapped with everyone else; glad that for one everyone's attention wasn't on him since it had been for the majority of the summer. It was certainly a welcomed change.

An arm loosely wrapped around his neck and gently pulled him backwards. Looking up, Harry saw the smiling face of Tonks with long red hair looking down at him. They shared a smile before Harry relaxed against her. He had to admit that he liked the way things were. He had a family regardless of how untraditional it was. Sirius, Remus and Tonks were the closest he had to relatives now and it was certainly better than anything he could have hoped for.

"Aw," Sirius cooed. "I think so too Pronglet. Way better than what I'm used to."

Several conversations broke out among the table. Ron and Ginny were talking about his new broom, Hermione and Remus were talking about the treatment of house elves (Hermione was more curious than anything), Mrs. Weasley was talking to Bill about his long hair, Mr. Weasley, Tonks and Sirius were discussing the journey to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ tomorrow, while Mad-Eye and Kingsley seemed to be in deep discussion about something. Harry knew better than to even try to find out what it was about.

All of a sudden Harry felt like he was being watched. Looking over his shoulder, Harry noticed Kreacher hiding in the shadows.

"What does he want?" Sirius hissed narrowing his eyes.

"I am sure that nothing bad," Remus said calmly, "He likes Harry."

Sirius crossed his arms and kept glaring at the book.

As discretely as possible, Harry left the table and approached the house elf. Kneeling down in front of the creature, Harry could see a nervous look on his face. He couldn't remember ever seeing such a look on the elf's face before. "Kreacher, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Kreacher has found something wrong in empty bedroom," Kreacher said softly. "Kreacher didn't want to bother Young Master but Young Master wouldn't send Kreacher away like Blood Trai—Master Sirius."

"Better a Blood Traitor than a Pureblood psycho," Sirius growled.

"He didn't mean it," Lily tried to calm Sirius who just snorted.

Kreacher had made a point to try to refrain from badmouthing Sirius in Harry's presence. It was still a work in progress though.

"It shows," James snorted.

"Kreacher needs to keep the house like Kreacher's mistress would have wanted it."

Harry placed a hand on Kreacher's shoulder and smiled warmly. "Okay, Kreacher, I understand," he said. "Why don't you show me where it is? If I can't take care of it we'll come back down and get Sirius."

Kreacher nodded then led the way out of the kitchen. As he followed Kreacher up the stairs, Harry had to wonder what could possibly make the house elf so nervous. As far as he knew Sirius and Remus had already taken care of anything that could cause anyone any harm. They walked down the hallway in silence until they reached the final bedroom on the left, one of the unused bedrooms just like Kreacher had said.

After stealing a glance at Kreacher, Harry slowly opened the door and turned on the lights. The room was decorated with dark green tones, giving off a Slytherin feel to the room.

"Of course," Sirius snorted, "My parents wanted us drilled on the Slytherin doctrine from a very young age. Everything had to be green and silver."

Harry made a mental note to offer this room to Professor Snape if he ever wanted to stay the night...not like that would ever happen in this lifetime. It just didn't hurt to be prepared.

"ARGH!" James cried at the thought.

"Harry!" Sirius cried with a hand on his chest, "Don't say things like that!"

Entering the room, Harry glanced around for any sign of danger but found nothing. He was about to turn around to ask what was he supposed to be looking for when the wardrobe shook. Memories of classes with Remus suddenly filled Harry's head. Remus had been the one to teach Harry about creatures that liked dark, enclosed spaces such as wardrobes; a shape shifter that would take the form of whatever will frighten the person it's facing the most. Considering history, Harry knew it would come out as a Dementor or possibly Voldemort.

"Then go get Remus!" Lily cried.

Sirius looked at her with his hand on his hips. "Remus?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lily smiled sheepishly, "I mean *you* and Remus. Yes, you and Remus."

Remus and James were trying hard to disguise their laughter.

Harry instantly flicked his right wrist only to have nothing happen. Panicking, Harry pulled up his sleeve to see that he had forgotten to put his wand holster on today. His eyes widened in alarm as the wardrobe wobbled fiercely causing it to burst open. All of the warmth of the late summer night suddenly vanished and was replaced by cold. Harry moved for the door but staggered before falling to his knees. Ignoring the cold as much as possible, Harry forced himself to stand. His vision started to darken as it became difficult to breathe.

A familiar high-pitched voice filled his ears. "*You will die just like your parents...just like your friend that Barty had to kill...because of you.*" Harry tried to shout for help...to do something but his body wouldn't listen. He was trapped listening to his worst nightmares, his worst memories. His mother's screams filled his ears as Harry collapsed to the floor.

"HELP!" the four cried.

A loud *thud* could be heard by everyone downstairs. Conversations instantly ceased as everyone looked in question at Sirius and Remus. The two Marauders glanced at each other and suddenly noticed that the teenager who had been sitting between them was nowhere in

sight. Without a word they took off, running as fast as they could out of the kitchen and to the staircase not caring that Mr. Weasley, Bill, Tonks, Kingsley and Mad-Eye were following them while Mrs. Weasley kept the teenagers in the kitchen. As they reached the top of the stairs, Sirius saw Kreacher running at him.

"Young Master is in trouble!" Kreacher yelled.

"Yeah. 'Cause you got him in trouble!" Sirius growled.

"Sirius! It wasn't his fault!" Lily scolded. "Now stop dawdling and help Harry!"

Within two steps Sirius grabbed Kreacher by the arm and lifted him in the air. "Where is he?" Sirius asked through his teeth. "If you have done something to him I swear I will rip you apart."

Kreacher nodded fearfully before Sirius released him. The seven adults followed Kreacher to the last bedroom on the left, aware of the drastic drop in temperature as they drew near. Everyone pulled out their wand as Sirius and Remus reached the doorway to the last room on the left. The sight before their eyes was something neither of them was ready for.

Harry was on the floor curled into a ball and shaking uncontrollably as a Dementor hovered over him. He was muttered something so softly that no one could make out what it was. Sirius and Remus moved to Harry's side while the remaining adults entered the room and sent the Boggart-turned-Dementor away with a few 'Riddikulus' spells. The room instantly heated up again as Remus summoned some chocolate from his room. A collective sigh was released as Sirius propped a still shaking Harry up.

The four sighed relieved. As James was about to continue he stopped and looked at Remus. Then looked at the book. He whispered something to Lily pointing at a passage and she giggled. Remus narrowed his eyes.

"What?" he said.

"Yes, what? I wanna laugh to," Sirius begged.

"Remus summoned the chocolate from his room," Lily said.

"So?" Sirius asked.

"Where would you go for chocolate Padfoot?" James asked.

"The kitchen," then as he understood Sirius burst in laughter.

Remus huffed, "Nothing wrong with keeping chocolate in my room."

Tonks was the first to notice Harry's bare right wrist. "The poor kid didn't have his wand," she said as she knelt down next to Sirius and took hold of Harry's hand. "He had no way to protect himself."

Sirius pried open Harry's mouth so Remus could force a piece of chocolate in. "Just let it melt, Harry," Remus said to the still shaking teen. "Don't worry. It's gone now." He then looked at Sirius, the worry shining through his eyes. "I thought we checked every room for Boggarts."

"We did," Sirius muttered as he pulled Harry to his chest and held him tightly. Slowly Sirius looked at the doorway where Kreacher was still standing. His eyes narrowed as he glared at the house elf. He was certainly not happy. "What happened?" Sirius demanded. "Harry has been nothing but nice to you. How could you do this to him?"

"Yes. How?" Sirius growled.

"Sirius-" Remus started.

"That elf is mean I tell you. Mean!" Sirius cried. Remus just let him. Kreacher had always spouted Sirius' parents beliefs and therefore been mean to Sirius. There was no changing what Sirius thought.

Kreacher looked horrified at the accusation. "Kreacher would never hurt Young Master," he said frantically. "Young Master wanted to help Kreacher. Young Master and Kreacher were surprised by evil creature. When Young Master fell Kreacher went for help—"

"Sirius didn't mean anything by it, Kreacher," Kingsley Shacklebolt interrupted,

"Yes, I did."

Lily just shook her head.

his voice calm and diplomatic. "He's just worried about Harry. We can take care of everything from here if you have something else to do."

After another glare from Sirius, Kreacher left. Mr. Weasley hurried down to the kitchen to let his wife know what happened, Kingsley, Bill and Mad-Eye following him a few moments later. Harry had finally stopped shaking but was still unresponsive. Sirius repositioned the teen in his arms and with one fluid motion, stood up then walked out of the room with Harry still safely in his arms. Remus followed him to Harry's room after quietly telling Tonks to call for Madam Pomfrey.

Entering Harry's room, Remus noticed that Sirius was carefully removing Harry's shoes as he still held on to the teen. Harry's head was resting against Sirius' chest, appearing to be in a deep sleep. Remus just stood in the doorway taking it all in. There had been too many close calls lately. Sirius was close to losing control tonight just like he had been at Hogwarts only two months ago. Watching his friend tend to the teenager he considered a son, Remus could only let them be. Sirius wouldn't listen to reason now. He needed time to cool off.

"Yes, that's the Padfoot we all know and love," James said. "Completely irrational being."

Sirius just shrugged but didn't deny anything.

Sometimes Remus hated being the rational one in the group.

"Never truer words," Remus sighed.

"Moony! What's this about?" James asked.

"Well, just for a change you two could realize by yourselves that charming all of Professor McGonagall's robes neon pink is *not* a good idea!"

"Of course it is!" Sirius said bewildered.

Remus smacked his forehead and looked pleadingly at the ceiling.

XXXX

Thanks for reading and reviewing.

I don't own any of this.

Chapter 5

Attack on the Hogwarts Express

"WHAT?" Lily yelled. "How can they attack the Hogwarts Express?" she asked horrified.

"Attacking?" Sirius provided innocently.

"They can't. The Hogwarts Express is a sacred institution," Lily glared at him. "It's one of those things that no matter what you don't attack. Because of the children."

"Sorry, Lily. But the psychos that agree with Voldemort don't hold anything sacred," James said grimly patting Lily's back.

Harry awoke to find that a few things were not as they should be. To start with, he was still dressed in the clothes he had worn yesterday. He hated sleeping in his jeans and usually made the effort, no matter how tired he was, to change into his pajama pants. Second, his head was resting on something firm but not hard. His pillows were normally soft. Thirdly, Harry couldn't remember even going to bed. That rarely happened. Lastly, Harry didn't hear the soft beeping of his heart that was supposed to be magically monitored. That never happened. Sirius and Remus always made sure the spell was working.

Slowly opening his eyes, Harry tilted his head up to see the somewhat blurry but sleeping face of his godfather. This wasn't a good sign. Sirius only was overly protective like this when Harry had an episode. Thinking back to last night, Harry remembered the celebration last night and seeing Kreacher. He suddenly remembered the Boggart in the wardrobe and what had happened when it came out. Harry quickly sat up as the realization of what must have happened afterwards ran through his mind. Kreacher must have gone for help meaning Sirius, Remus and everyone in the house saw that he couldn't even stand up to a Boggart.

"Harry!" Lily scolded, "You didn't have your wand! There is no way you could have done anything!"

"Harry is never going to think like that," Remus said grimly, "He always sees things in the worst way possible."

As quietly and carefully as possible, Harry slid out of bed so he didn't wake Sirius. He really didn't need to have an overprotective godfather wanting to talk about what happened right now but deep down Harry knew that was what Sirius, Remus and everyone else under the roof was bound to do the moment they saw him. Carefully walking around the bed, Harry

instinctively maneuvered around everything to his bedside table and grabbed his glasses. The moment he put them on Harry saw his wand in his wand holster and instantly grabbed it and put it on. He wasn't going to let what happened last night happen again. He couldn't afford it to.

Escaping from his room was a little trickier. His door had a tendency to creek when it was opened too slowly and the light from the hallway was enough to wake anyone up. Carefully, Harry opened his door partially and slid out of the room before closing the door and letting out a sigh of relief. He knew he needed to get moving since they would be leaving for Kings Cross Station in a few hours and he still had to finish packing.

It was still extremely early but that didn't stop Harry from going through the usual routine of preparing breakfast for everyone. He walked down the stairs slowly so he didn't alert anyone that someone in the house was awake. He crept into the kitchen only to find that someone else was already up, sitting at the table with a tea cup in their hands looking like they had been up all night.

"Tonks?" Harry asked in confusion. Tonks always hated getting up in the morning. It had been a joke that it must be something in the Black bloodline since Sirius hated mornings too.

"It's common sense," Sirius huffed and the others chuckled.

"What are you doing in here so early in the morning?"

Tonks didn't say a word. Instead, she jumped to her feet, quickly approached Harry and pulled him into an embrace. Her hair had changed back to the short, spiky and purple style that she seemed to favor lately. "What were you thinking?" she asked softly. "Why didn't you carry your wand? Who cares about the Ministry's Underage Wizardry Laws? Do you have any idea what it was like to see you on the floor with a Dementor over you? Do you have any idea how much you frightened Sirius, Remus and me?"

"Hey!" James cried, "Don't make him feel worse than he already is feeling!"

"Calm down James," Remus said, "She's just worried about him."

Harry just let Tonks hold him. How could he have been so thick? By not thinking before running off with Kreacher, Harry caused everyone to worry. It seemed that he had learned nothing over the years. He was still running head first into danger. *No, not anymore*, Harry

mentally vowed. *I don't care what it takes. I'm not going to cause trouble for Sirius and Remus this year. They've had too much of it lately.*

"See what she did!" James said annoyed.

Remus sighed, "I know she was worried but I have to agree with James," then looking at the book he said sternly, "Harry James Potter, don't even think about not letting us know you need help!"

"Yes, sir. Moony, sir!" Sirius standing up and giving Remus a military salute. Remus looked at him annoyed and while Sirius was still in his salute pose Remus calmly swung one of his legs making Sirius lose his balance and fall on his butt. Sirius glared menacingly at the laughing people in the room.

Not receiving an answer, Tonks held Harry at arms length and looked into his emerald green eyes to see pain and regret. She let out a sigh as she pulled Harry into another embrace. "I'm sorry, kid," Tonks said gently. "I know it wasn't intentional. Kreacher told us what happened. You were trying to help him but how could you go in there without your wand?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "It just surprised me. Before I could run out of the room it just got to be too much."

Tonks let out a sigh and kissed Harry on the top of his head. "Don't worry about it," she said the released him from her hold. "Just don't do anything like that again. You're like the nephew I never had." Tonks leaned back against the table and looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "Didn't you wear that yesterday?"

Harry shook his head as he walked over to the ice box to start preparing breakfast. *Welcome back, Tonks.* She was always quick to notice when someone's clothes didn't look right. Sirius had said it was a 'girl thing'. "Sirius was still sleeping," Harry said with a shrug. "I figured he needed the sleep since I know he has a tendency to stay up most of the night when something happens to me."

Tonks eyed Harry skeptically. "In other words you want to avoid a confrontation for as long as possible," she clarified.

"Avoiding confrontation with Padfoot is just the smart thing to do Tonks," James explained.

"Yes, for instance," Remus explained, "James avoided confrontation with Padfoot about spilling his special shampoo by hiding the bottle and making Padfoot think he was losing his marbles and not remembering where he put his shampoo."

James grinned sheepishly while Sirius eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Now, Paddy. Don't be like that. Good doggy. AHHHHHHHHHHH!" James cried as he ran out of the room followed by an enormous dog. Remus and Lily just heard the crashes outside until finally James ran back in and slammed the door turning the key.

They heard a soft pop as Mrs. Potter's voice carried upstairs, "What's going on up there?"

"Oh, nothing Mrs. Potter," they heard Sirius' voice, "Just the wind banging doors."

They heard footsteps.

"What are you doing out here?"

"The door banged," Sirius said innocently.

"Well, get inside," she said and James had to reluctantly unlock the door. He ran behind Remus.

Mrs. Potter opened the door and ushered a smiling Sirius inside, "Is everything okay here?" she asked.

"Oh, yes Mrs. Potter," Lily said smiling, "Everything peachy."

James whimpered a little from behind Remus when Sirius sat on the bed next to them.

"Good," Mrs. Potter nodded and left closing the door.

Sirius innocent smile turned into a cold glare. More whimpers from James. And Remus just fled his spot in time to avoid the trashing pillows.

Then let out another sigh when Harry said nothing to correct her. "Do you have any idea how frantic he's going to be when he wakes up to find you gone?"

Harry pulled the eggs and bacon out of the ice box before turning to face Tonks. "That's why I plan on bringing him breakfast before he wakes up," he answered then pulled out the supplies for muffins. "Sirius is always calmer after he eats; at least that is what Moony tells me." Remus had said that Sirius was like an overgrown teenager and felt the need to eat at least five times a day. Sirius claimed that he was just making up for the dismal meals he had been given in Azkaban so everyone just let him be.

"Hey! I am a growing boy!" Sirius cried.

"The question is where you are growing," Lily said knowingly and patting her stomach.

"You've got a point," Tonks said thoughtfully. "So, do you need help?"

Harry glanced at Tonks nervously. It always took twice as long to prepare a meal when Tonks helped out since someone had to usually clean up her mess and then make what she was supposed to. The problem was Harry never could say no to Tonks. "You can mind the bacon while I make the muffins and the eggs," Harry said at last. "Keep it on low heat."

Tonks happily hurried to the stove. By the time Harry had the muffins and eggs ready the bacon was finished. As Harry put the bacon on a charmed plate, Tonks started on the toast (after instruction from Harry of course). Soon breakfast was prepared and Tonks sat down with a proud smile on her face. They ate in a comfortable silence before Harry prepared two plates and left the kitchen with Tonks wishing him luck as he left.

As carefully as possible, Harry walked up the stairs and down the still empty hallway. He turned the corner and stopped in front of Remus' door to see that it was partially open. Grateful for small favors, Harry opened the door completely with his back and entered the room as quietly as possible. He saw Remus asleep in his bed and noticed the tense look on his guardian's face. Whatever Remus was dreaming about it certainly wasn't pleasant.

With every effort to be silent, Harry carefully placed the plate on the bedside table. There was a soft ding as the plate touched the table but it was enough for Remus to wake and immediately sit upright in his bed appearing to be ready to strike. He relaxed the moment he saw Harry and rubbed his eyes tiredly. Harry instantly felt guilty. He was the reason his guardians were so exhausted.

Groans were heard.

"Morning cub," Remus said then noticed the plate of food. "Please tell me you weren't downstairs cooking by yourself."

"Always thinking the worst Moony," Sirius shook his head.

"I find that with you and James the worst is usually accurate," Remus said dryly.

Harry shook his head. "Tonks was there," he said. "She helped with the bacon and toast. She's actually quite proud of it so it wouldn't hurt to say something when you see her." He glanced at the plate he was still carrying and knew the food wasn't going to stay warm for

long. "I need to take this to Sirius. If you want you can bring your food into my room so you two can yell at me together."

"Apparently Harry takes after Moony," James chuckled.

Remus pulled back his covers and slowly got out of bed. He was wearing dark blue pajama pants and a white shirt that seemed to make him look paler than he already was. The full moon had been a few weeks ago but with all of the stress Remus had been under it seemed that he had never really recovered from it. "We're not going to yell at you," Remus said as he grabbed his plate and followed Harry out of the room. "Just promise to tell someone next time Kreacher wants to show you something, all right?"

"See!" Remus huffed annoyed.

Harry looked at Remus and smiled. His guardians had always tried to refrain from yelling at their charge since it had a tendency to remind Harry of his life at the Dursleys. In some ways Harry was still trying to forget his life with his relatives but some things like his fear of being a freak stayed and probably always would. "I can do that," Harry said as they approached his room and entered.

Sirius was still asleep in the same position as when Harry had left. Harry and Remus grinned at each other. They knew they could have a lot of fun but also knew today wasn't the day to do it. "Morning Padfoot!" Remus exclaimed as he plopped on the bed causing Sirius to wake immediately.

"You know, I can already see that," James said imitating a disoriented Sirius. He was stopped when a pillow hit him square on the face.

"Moony!" Sirius shouted as he sat up quickly. "Harry is still..." He stopped speaking when he noticed Harry standing at the side of the bed with a plate of food in his hands. Sirius took the plate of food and set it on the bedside table before grabbing Harry and pulling him back on the bed. Harry landed on the soft bed with an 'oomph' beside Sirius who instantly wrapped an arm around the teen. "Stay there, Pronglet," Sirius said as he grabbed his plate with the other hand and started eating. "What time is it?"

"Now, *that* is something I can see Sirius doing," Lily chuckled.

"Early," Remus answered. "Harry and Tonks made breakfast this morning. Apparently we weren't the only ones who had trouble sleeping last night."

Sirius glanced down at Harry and met the teen's gaze. "Are you okay?" he asked then let a relieved smile appear on his face when Harry nodded. "Good. You need to stop scaring me or I'm going to be as grey as Moony." Remus moved to object.

Sirius smiled sheepishly and moved away from the fuming werewolf.

"You know I'm kidding," Sirius said to his friend then returned his attention to Harry. "By the way, there's something important we need to talk to you before we leave for the train station."

Harry glanced at Remus nervously before returning his attention to his godfather. These types of talks were never a good thing. They usually came when something had to be broken gently to Harry. "What happened?" he asked softly.

Sirius cleared his throat and set his plate down. "Well, Fudge is still upset with Dumbledore for claiming that Voldemort has returned," he said carefully. "Fudge thinks Dumbledore's trying to cause problems and since no one wanted the Defense position Fudge decided to hire someone for Dumbledore. Her name is Dolores Umbridge. She's the Undersecretary for the Minister and certainly has no love for Dumbledore."

"Can Fudge do that?" Lily cried outraged.

"The Ministry has no say over Hogwarts!" Remus stated.

"I bet Fudge changed some law to suit his purposes," James said frowning grimly.

Harry looked at Remus in confusion. "What about you, Moony?" he asked. "Everyone loved it when you came back last year. No one cares about the wolf. We know you would never hurt us."

"YES! PROFESSOR MOONY!" James and Sirius cheered.

Remus smiled at the comment. "I know you don't care about that but the Ministry does," he said softly.

"Stupid Ministry," Sirius grumbled.

"Fudge is so desperate to maintain his position in the Ministry that the thought of another war is too much for him to handle. This is a power play, cub. Anything that Umbridge sees at

Hogwarts will most likely be reported to Fudge. This includes anything that happens with you. Many in the Ministry believe Skeeter's articles about Dumbledore using you to gain support."

"But he's not," Harry protested. "I was the one to say Voldemort came back—"

"—but so far all everyone has is Dumbledore's word," Sirius interrupted in a calm voice which sounded so strange coming from the Animagus. "As hard as it may be, Harry, we need you to keep your distance from Umbridge. You don't have to agree with what she says; just don't be vocal about your own beliefs. We know the truth. That's all that matters."

"Good thing that Harry is quite different from his parents on that regard," Remus nodded.

"Meaning?" Lily hissed while steely green and hazel eyes glared at him.

"That you two find it... er... difficult... yeah, difficult to not express your views on any given subject," Sirius explained proud of his dealing with the subject of the couples hot headness.

Harry couldn't help feeling a little nervous. Sirius rarely talked like this. Something else was going on. Harry could feel it. Sirius and Remus never pulled him aside to warn him about something unless it was extremely important. "What aren't you telling me?" Harry asked cautiously.

Remus and Sirius shared a glance for a moment, appearing to have another one of their silent conversations. "We just want you to be prepared," Sirius said at last as he returned his attention to Harry. "Umbridge is a Fudge fanatic. Whatever he tells her is what she believes but that doesn't mean it's the truth. We have no doubt that she will try to make you and your classmates believe the Ministry's version rather than Dumbledore's."

"We just want you to be careful, Harry," Remus added. "This is your first day out in public and we know how you hate attention so we just thought we would give you a few words of advice to avoid whatever Umbridge may try. People are allowed to believe what they want. That is their right."

"As much as I like to agree with myself, and I do think people have the right to believe what they want, I think that we shouldn't allow that freedom to Padfoot," Remus said wisely.

"Agreed," James said.

"Why not? He has the same rights as anyone else?" Lily said defensively. She noticed Sirius wasn't saying anything just smiling with a dreamy expression.

"Not when he believes he can fly without a broom and decides to test it he doesn't!" Remus cried.

"He was a little inebriated at the time though," James explained, "We had found one of the older students stash of Firewhisky and decided to try it."

Harry understood what his guardians were and were not saying. Umbridge would probably try to convince people that Voldemort hadn't returned, Harry being one of them. With the current articles Rita Skeeter was writing, everyone was bound to believe that Harry was either a liar or a helpless little boy. They wouldn't care about the truth. Sirius and Remus were right. He knew the truth as did those he cared about. That was all that mattered. He wouldn't allow Dolores Umbridge to get the better of him.

Sirius and Remus had arranged for three taxis to be waiting for them at Number 2, Grimmauld Place three-quarters of an hour before the train was supposed to leave. Harry (with Hedwig in her cage), Sirius, Remus and Tonks went in the first car, Ron, Fred, George and Mad-Eye Moody went in the second car, and Hermione (carrying Crookshanks), Ginny, Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley went in the third. It was a short ride to King's Cross Station. Sirius and Remus remained at Harry's side while Tonks stayed a few steps behind, pushing one of the luggage carts. The rest of the group followed them a few strides back.

Sirius and Harry passed through the barrier first with Remus following them. Stepping onto platform nine and three-quarters, Harry had to smile at the sight of the Hogwarts Express. Even with the warnings Sirius and Remus had given him for the upcoming school year there was something about the large, scarlet steam engine that called to you. Harry could remember seeing the train for the first time four years ago. *So much has changed since then.*

There were a good number of students with their families on the platform but not too many that you couldn't move. The adults had figured that it would be better to arrive a little early for Harry's sake. The fewer people around the less likely the chance of something happening. Tonks, Mr. Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody took the carts to be loaded onto the train while everyone else surrounded Harry, Sirius and Remus.

"Everyone have everything?" Mrs. Weasley asked for the tenth time and received affirmative nods in return. "Now remember to behave this year, especially you, Ronald." Ron rolled his eyes in annoyance at the comment. He had heard this speech countless times since he had received the Prefect's badge. "You're a Prefect now and must set an example."

"Sounds like Moony's mum last year remember?" Sirius said.

"Yes, you two didn't let me forget," Remus hissed annoyed.

"Oh, Remy," James said in a high voice ignoring Remus, "Be very good this year. Mummy is so proud of you. A Prefect! Do remember you have to set a good example, and don't forget to wear warm clothes when you go on patrols."

"So my parents are a little over protective," Remus mumbled, "It's understandable. Stop laughing you two!"

"Yes Mum," Ron said in a bored voice.

Mrs. Weasley looked directly at Fred and George who smiled innocently back. "I'm not going to even bother with you two," she said with a tired sigh since she knew they wouldn't listen to her anyways. "Just remember what we talked about last night."

Fred and George instantly puffed their chests out and saluted Mrs. Weasley, earning snickers from Ron and Ginny as Mr. Weasley, Tonks and Mad-Eye Moody rejoined the group. "Don't worry Mum," Fred said with a professional tone to his voice. "We won't let you down."

"No one can stop Fred and George Weasley when they are on a mission," George added in the same tone.

"Mission? What mission? Should we be worried?" Lily asked cautiously.

Harry glanced at Sirius and Remus in confusion but saw that his guardians also had no idea what was going on. Fred and George bid their parents goodbye then hurried onto the train. Noticing that more people were coming onto the platform, Mad-Eye growled that the teenagers should get a move on. Ginny quickly bid farewell followed by Ron and Hermione. Once they were all on the train, the six adults all focused on Harry. Knowing what was coming, Harry put Hedwig down and waited for the inevitable.

Mrs. Weasley pulled him into a fierce embrace. "Take care of yourself, dear," she whispered into his ear before letting him go. Mr. Weasley grasped Harry's shoulder and told him to look after himself. Tonks pulled Harry into an embrace before demanding that Harry write to her at least once a week. Once she let go Mad-Eye grasped Harry's shoulder in a similar fashion to Mr. Weasley and reminded Harry 'constant vigilance'.

Harry bid them goodbye then turned to his guardians. It seemed so hard to believe that two months had passed already. Christmas seemed like such a long ways away and this year it was planned to be a small family get-together at Grimmauld Place. "Thanks for everything," Harry said at last. "I—I really don't know what I would have done if you hadn't—" He was pulled into a group hug before he could finish.

"No need to thank us, cub," Remus said sincerely. "Take care and remember what we told you."

Sirius leaned down to Harry. "Use your mirror whenever possible," he whispered into Harry's ear. "You never know who may be peaking in your mail. If you have any problems from Umbridge or the Ministry contact us immediately. They have no right to question you without one of us there, remember that, Pronglet."

"Nope they don't," Lily nodded approvingly, "You are an underage wizard and they cannot question you without a guardian."

"Uhm, Lily, they are not *allowed* to, but, if they break the rules they can," James said wincing at her glare.

"I will," Harry said as he took a step back and smiled at Sirius and Remus. Why was it so hard to say goodbye? Harry knew the answer to that. Sirius and Remus had been like an anchor for him the past two months. They were there when he woke up calling Cedric's name. They were there when he finally talked about what happened. They were there to help him when the small outbursts started coming. Now he would have to work through any further outbursts alone. It just seemed wrong.

"Mind Poppy, Harry," Remus added, "and remember to take your potion for as long as she believes necessary." Harry and Sirius rolled their eyes at the overprotective werewolf. "I saw that," he said instantly. "From both of you."

Sirius looked at Remus with a look on his face that said he was biting back a laugh, "Channeling your mum Moony?"

He was shoved to the floor which he hit with an ungraceful "Ouch."

Sirius just shook his head at the comment, noticing how crowded the platform was now. "You better get going, Pronglet," he said. "We'll talk to you soon and will be right here waiting for you when the train comes for Christmas break."

"I can't wait," Harry said with a smile then gave each of his guardians one last hug before picking up Hedwig in her cage, bidding goodbye and hurrying on the train to find his friends.

Harry found Ron, Hermione and Ginny already seated in a compartment in the middle of the train. Placing Hedwig on the floor, Harry took the vacant seat by the window next to Ron. Hermione and Ginny were talking quietly, giggling from time to time like they had a tendency to do the last month. Harry and Ron shared a confused glance and shrugged. Sometimes girls were just so strange.

"Tell me about it!" James cried exasperated.

"We are a lot less confusing than you people," Lily said dryly.

"Lily dear, there is no way we are half as confusing as you girls," Sirius said seriously.

Ron and Hermione left for the Prefect Carriage ten minutes before eleven after promising that they would be back as soon as they could. To Harry it seemed that Ron and Hermione still believed that Harry was upset about not becoming a Prefect. *Or maybe they're worried about leaving me alone since Ginny doesn't know about my heart condition.* Either way it felt like they didn't trust Harry without someone around that knew his secret. He had to wonder if Sirius and Remus had said something to them to make them so overprotective.

"I bet they did," James said approvingly.

Since there wasn't anything to really do, Harry pulled out one of the books Sirius had bought him and started reading. There was the final whistle and with a lurch the train started moving. Sitting in silence, it wasn't long before the door slid open to reveal a round faced

Gryffindor in Harry's year named Neville Longbottom. "Er—can I join you?" he asked timidly. "Everywhere else is full."

Seeing Neville, Harry suddenly remembered something Voldemort had said at the graveyard. *'How would you feel to being just as insane as the Longbottoms?'* He had completely forgotten about the comment. What did it mean? "Of course Neville," Harry said with a smile. "So how was your summer?"

Neville shrugged as he sat down beside Harry with Trevor in one hand and his school bag in another. "It was okay," he said, "but you'll never believe what I got for my birthday." He set his school bag down, reached inside and pulled out what looked like a cactus plant except that it was grey and was covered with boils instead of spines.

"Let me get this straight," James said carefully, "He's excited about a cactus?"

"Oh, hush James," Lily said, "Let the poor boy be."

Harry took a closer look at the plant that seemed to be pulsating, remembering something from the overabundance of reading he had done over the holiday. "*Mimulus mimbletonia*," he said more to himself than those in the room. It was a really rare plant that had a sort of defense mechanism that could be very messy.

Neville stared at Harry in amazement. "H—how did you know what it was?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I was bored so I did a lot of reading over the summer," he said. "Sirius and Remus wouldn't let me leave my bed for two weeks unless it was absolutely necessary. It kept my mind off of other things too." Not wanting to elaborate, Harry returned to looking at the plant. "So what are you going to do with it?"

"I want to see if I can breed it," Neville said proudly. "I'll have to talk to Professor Sprout. I really can't wait to show it to her." Everyone knew that Herbology was Neville's best subject. It was really the only class he wasn't timid in.

"Maybe you could do some sort of project on it and present it to the class," Harry offered. The only reason he knew about the plant was because Sirius let him read some of the books from the Black family library and had almost memorized his class books by now. *I'm getting to be as bad as Hermione*. "Just don't activate the defense mechanisms in here...maybe when Malfoy is around."

Sirius clapped happily, "Oh, why don't they go looking for Malfoy?"

Lily got up slowly, and once she reached the bed, from where Sirius was looking at her strangely, she smacked his head and went back to her seat as if nothing happened.

Neville looked at Harry in horror. "I—I could never do that!" he exclaimed. "Malfoy would kill me!"

"Why?" Ginny asked curiously. "What happens?"

"Liquid will squirt out of the boils," Harry answered automatically. *Yeah, I'm really turning into Hermione.* "The aroma isn't too pleasant either." He returned his gaze to Neville. "Have you ever tried to activate it?"

Sirius looked dreamily at the book and you could see him envisioning Malfoy covered in the plant's liquid.

Neville shook his head. "I read that the Stinksap's not poisonous though, which is a good thing in case I accidentally set it off," he said the set the plant down on the floor then looked at Harry. "How are you doing, Harry? Were you really in bed for two weeks because of what happened?"

Harry nodded. "I'm doing a lot better," he admitted. "I try not to think about what happened. For a while whenever I closed my eyes all I saw was green light but Sirius and Remus helped a lot. I'll be relieved to sleep in the dorm room tonight. All of the spells and charms they had placed around my room were a little suffocating."

"What do you mean Harry?" Ginny asked with a partially curious but confused look on her face. Harry didn't like that look. Hermione got that look when she was on a mission to figure something out. Ginny's eyes widened with realization a moment later. "Do you mean you could actually feel the spells and charms in your room?"

Harry glanced at Neville before looking at Ginny. "Well, yeah," he said unsure why she was acting like this. "Every night I could feel them activate. What's the big deal? There were so many it would be impossible not to feel them."

Ginny rubbed her eyes before looking at Neville for help. She only received a shrug as an answer. "Harry, it takes a powerful witch or wizard to be able to actually *feel* magic," she said

carefully. "Not everyone can do it but it's not unheard of. Has something like that ever happened before this summer?"

"Well, we already know Harry is powerful," Remus said, "Three Patronuses. Ring a bell?"

Thinking about it, Harry remembered feeling the Unforgivables in Defense class last year but that had been different. He had felt a portion of what their affect would be. He hadn't actually felt the magic behind them...right? "Once, I think," he said at last then shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? Maybe it was just a fluke. If it happens again I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore about it."

That seemed to satisfy Ginny who nodded then pulled a book out of her bag and started reading. Harry returned to reading his book while Neville pulled out a Herbology book from his bag. The three of them read in silence until the sound of the door sliding open again distracted them. Looking up, Harry saw that it was Cho Chang, a pretty girl with long black hair who was also the Seeker on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. He also knew that she had been close to Cedric Diggory last year.

Cho looked at Harry in surprise for a moment before she collected herself. "Um...hi," she said with a smile to hide her uneasiness. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you, Harry."

Already dreading what she wanted to talk about, Harry stood up and put his book on his seat before following Cho out of the compartment. The door slid shut leaving them face to face in the compact hallway. "So, what's on your mind?" Harry asked trying to hide all of the nervousness he was feeling. He couldn't help it. This was Cedric's girlfriend. If his death had been hard for Harry to deal with he couldn't imagine what Cho had been going through.

"Well...I was just wondering how you were doing," Cho said as she fidgeted nervously.

That was a lie and both of them knew it. Harry let out a sigh as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "I'm fine," he said automatically. "Now how about you say what you really wanted to when you asked me to come out here?"

"Very blunt," James said.

"Must be a Potter trait," Lily chuckled and James nodded a little then suddenly stopped and glared at her.

"I am a very subtle person!"

"Uh, huh," Remus sniggered and the other two burst out laughing with him.

Cho's gaze fell as the floor suddenly became extremely interesting. "I...I was hoping you could answer some questions but if you don't want to..."

Harry glanced down the hallway in both directions, noticing that Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were standing about twenty feet away watching and giggling silently. Shaking his head slowly, he returned his focus to Cho. "I know you have questions about what happened, Cho," he said softly, "but this isn't the place to talk about them. When we get back to school, maybe we can find a place to talk without so many listening to our every word."

Cho looked at Harry in confusion and saw Harry's eyes move to the right then back to her. As casually as possible, Cho glanced to the right and saw the two Gryffindor girls watching them. "I understand," she said with a soft smile as she looked back at Harry. "Thanks for being so thoughtful, Harry."

"Of course he is," Lily cooed, "he's my son after all."

Sirius coughed something that sounded an awful lot like: "So modest."

"No problem," Harry said with a nod. "See you later."

They parted ways, Harry re-entering his compartment and Cho leaving for her own. With one glance Harry knew Ginny and Neville had heard everything so he returned to his seat and resumed reading. Yes, talking about Cedric would be hard but Harry knew he wasn't the only one mourning. He had seen Sirius and Remus stumble through stories about James and Lily Potter, ignoring their own pain so he could know more about his parents.

James and Lily hugged Sirius and Remus.

"Thank you," Lily whispered.

"Least we could do," Sirius said patting her back.

He could do the same for Cho. Perhaps it would help to be the strong one instead of relying on someone else.

It was more than an hour later when Ron and Hermione had returned from their meeting. They had missed the food trolley, something that Ron grumbled about for nearly a quarter of an hour while Hermione listed off the new Prefects from each house. Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were the Slytherin Prefects, Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott were from Hufflepuff, and Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil were from Ravenclaw. Harry could already see problems with Malfoy being a Prefect but also knew that there weren't a lot of choices from the Slytherin lot.

"He's going to abuse his power," Sirius snorted.

"Just like his father," James grimaced. "Remember when he was a Prefect? A nightmare, and we weren't even supposed to be on his radar that much since we were firsties."

"Nah, my family was already arranging his and Narcissa's engagement. He got out of his way to make my life hell for besmirching the family name by being a Gryffindor and unfortunately for you; you were with me," Sirius said scowling.

Once Hermione finished listing off the Prefects, she looked directly at Harry with a sympathetic look on her face. "Just so you know, there are a lot of people asking about you, Harry," Hermione said gently. "Um...did you come out of the compartment at all?"

"I talked to Cho a little bit," Harry said with a raised eyebrow. Why should that matter if he left the compartment or not? "Why do you ask?"

Hermione inhaled deeply as if she needed to prepare herself for something. "Well...um...I guess not many were expecting you to look the way you do now," she said carefully. Harry glanced down at his body before looking back at Hermione confused. "It's not bad," she quickly added. "It's just that they were sort of expecting you to look like you did at the end of last term."

"Ah, that's rich. What did they expect? A broken Harry?" Lily said angry.

Harry was still confused. He hadn't changed that much, right? How could he? The only thing he had been allowed to do this summer was tae-kwon-do and tai chi. Yes, he had put on a little muscle but it was only noticeable now because the training he had done during the two summers before this one. Was it his fault that no one noticed it before? Were they really expecting him to come back the same weak kid? *Probably.*

Just then the compartment door slid open again to reveal the last person Harry wanted to see right now. Draco Malfoy, flanked by his cronies Crabbe and Goyle looked particularly smug today. Harry had to assume that it was because Malfoy was a Prefect and Harry was not. Malfoy however looked just as surprised as Cho at the sight of Harry. It seemed that the sleek blond haired and pointed chin Slytherin was also expecting Harry to look like he had a little over two months ago.

"Can we help you with something Malfoy?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing at the three Slytherins in the doorway.

"It seems that the rumors are true," Malfoy drawled, a cruel smile appearing on his face. "Tell me, Potter, did you think you would finally get a date looking like this? I guess now that Diggory is out of the way—"

"That's, that's," Lily spluttered horrified.

"Uncalled for is what that is," Remus said angrily. "How can he be so cruel and flippant about Cedric's death?"

"Because he was raised to use every weapon he has at his disposal to get advantage and to think that he has the right to be cruel to others," Sirius said, "What? It's not my fault. It's just the way things are. I was raised like that too. It's just that not all of us realize that we shouldn't."

"And sometimes it takes time," Lily said.

Surprisingly Sirius answered calmly, "Yes, I know I may have let my upbringing show in my dealings with Snape. But in my defense he isn't a saint either, and I don't do it because I think I'm better than the rest of the world. It's just that Snivellus always rubbed me the wrong way."

Ron and Hermione were instantly on their feet with their wands pointing at Malfoy. "Get out of here you git," Ron hissed.

Knowing that trouble was about to start, Harry slowly stood and put a hand on Ron's shoulder. Sirius and Remus had warned him about this. He knew people like Malfoy were going to use Cedric's memory to upset him, something Harry couldn't afford to happen. Nothing Malfoy could say would ever change Harry's beliefs. That was what mattered. "He's not worth it, Ron," Harry said calmly then looked at Malfoy. "Please leave, Malfoy. It is rude to interrupt or is your father too busy tending to his master to teach you manners?"

Malfoy inhaled sharply at the comment as his eyes narrowed. "You were lucky last time, Potter," he hissed. "Luck won't save you next time."

Without waiting for retaliation, Malfoy left with Crabbe and Goyle following him. Ron and Hermione lowered their wands and turned to Harry who was avoiding their eyes. He had to admit Malfoy had a point. He had been lucky to escape the graveyard. Voldemort had underestimated his outbursts. Chances were slim that would happen again.

All of a sudden the train came to an abrupt stop causing everyone to lose their footing and fall to the ground. Thuds and bangs of luggage falling out of racks could be heard. A strange feeling of déjà vu filled Harry. Scrambling to his feet, Harry flicked his wrist and felt his wand in his hand. Carefully, he maneuvered around everyone still on the floor and looked out the window. He didn't see anything but that didn't mean there wasn't anything out there.

"I have a feeling the title of this chapter is about to happen," Remus said shakily clutching his robes at chest high.

Turning around to face his friends, Harry felt an intense cold fill his body. His eyes widened in shock. *No, they can't be here. Not again!* Without saying a word, Harry hurried to the compartment door and opened it. He poked his head out and looked both ways, seeing nothing but other students doing the same thing. Harry instantly knew he would have to take charge of the situation. He didn't know of anyone else who knew the Patronus Charm and didn't have the time to find out. He could only hope that he was strong enough to pull it off.

"Excuse me? Why would you have to take charge? Let some older student or the driver deal with this!" James cried angry. "You are not responsible for the whole world Harry!"

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked instantly.

Harry stepped out into the hallway and took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.* "Everyone please stay in your compartments and keep the doors closed!" he announced then looked over his shoulder at those in his compartment. "That goes for all of you too."

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm. "Harry no!" she shouted as she hurried to him. "You're not strong enough yet!"

"Yes, thank you Hermione!" Sirius cried, "Let someone help Harry! Don't try to be the hero and get yourself killed or worse!"

Harry gasped as intense cold increased, making it difficult to breathe. Grabbing the wall for support, Harry closed his eyes and focused. "Hermione, don't argue with me," Harry scolded. "It's Dementors. I can feel them coming. You don't know how to protect yourself from them. I do!"

Feeling his equilibrium returning, Harry opened his eyes and met her gaze with a determination he never knew he had. Hermione reluctantly nodded and backed into the compartment. Returning his focus to the matter at hand, Harry started walking cautiously towards the front of the train. He could feel the cold increasing. He started to shiver as he tightened his grip on his wand.

Suddenly one of the entrances to the train opened to reveal two Dementors trying to enter the train. A high-pitched laugh filled his ears. Harry instantly pointed his wand, focusing on his summer with Sirius and Remus while shouting "*Expecto Patronum!*" Silver light filled the hallway with such intensity that Harry had to look away. As the light dimmed, Harry opened his eyes to see that he once again had two silver companions. On his left was a silver wolf (Moony) while a large silver dog (Midnight) was on his right. Looking straight ahead, Harry could see a silver stag chasing off the Dementors. With a flick of the wand the door closed and locked. *At least they can't come back.*

The severe coldness was decreasing but Harry knew he would need some chocolate. Letting out a sigh of relief, Harry looked down at his companions and smiled. "I need you two to search the train and make sure no more Dementors are lurking around," Harry instructed. "After that you are free to go."

Moving out of the way, Harry watched as Midnight and Moony ran to the front of the train before turning around and running to the end of the train, appearing to be doing nothing more than racing each other. Once they reached the end of the train, they looked at Harry one more time before vanishing into the air. Harry walked back to his compartment and knocked on the door. "Housekeeping," he called out.

Hermione slid the compartment door open and glared at Harry, clearly not approving of his attempted humor. She was glaring at him with such force that Harry had never thought possible, at least from Hermione. "This is hardly the time to be making jokes," she scolded.

"Yeah, not funny Harry!" Remus scolded shaking his finger at the book.

"Okay," Harry said with a shrug. "Next time I'll say 'I'm a Dementor here to suck your soul out now let me in'." Ron and Ginny snickered at the comment. "I need you two to round up the Prefects, Head boy and Head girl to check the compartments. Make sure everyone's all right, especially the first years. Hand out chocolate if you have to. I'm going to have a word with the driver. Twice in three years..."

"Can do Harry," Ron said as he stepped out into the hallway. "Shout out if you need anything."

"James."

"Yes, Lily," James answered.

"Did I just hear *your* son say he was going to foolishly check on the driver *alone*?"

James checked the book and nodded grimly.

Harry nodded then made his way to the front of the train. He couldn't believe this was happening again. Fortunately he wasn't in the same position as he had been in two years ago. This time he had known what to do and had defended himself. Now he just had to figure out why they were here in the first place. Ignoring the whispers that filled the air, Harry reached the door and slowly opened it. He had been prepared to see the driver huddled in a corner suffering for the affects of the Dementors.

What Harry actually found was completely different. The thin, silver haired driver was on the floor with his lifeless blue eyes staring upward. Slowly, Harry knelt down and felt for a pulse but found nothing. The driver was dead.

"Harry, slowly but decidedly back away and go back for help!" Remus ordered.

A sudden movement from the right caught Harry's attention. Without a thought, Harry acted, pointing his wand at the distraction and shouting, "*Stupefy!*"

A tall figure with a black cloak and white mask blocked the spell before firing a shot of red light at Harry. Moving out of its path, Harry scrambled to his feet, ready to defend himself. He needed to think of something. Dementors were one thing but Death Eaters? How in the world was he supposed to do this with a train full of people? Someone was bound to get hurt.

"And someone could come help!" Sirius cried.

"Give up, Potter," the Death Eater hissed. "I would hate for someone else to die because of you."

"Hey, you're the one that killed the poor bloke. He's dead because of *you* not Harry!" James cried angry.

Harry inhaled sharply at the comment but made no other movement. It seemed that Voldemort and his followers were aware that Harry valued the lives of others above his own since Voldemort had taunted Harry about Cedric's death while they had been dueling. The Death Eater apparently ran out of patience and fired another unspoken spell at Harry. Quickly moving out of the way, Harry miscalculated his steps and tripped over the body of the driver...right into the waiting arms of the Death Eater.

Grabbing Harry by the robes, the Death Eater roughly pulled Harry out of the train then with a flick of his wand locked every door and window on the train so no one could get out.

"Like that makes a difference. Didn't see them jumping to help Harry anyway," Sirius snorted.

"I am sure Hermione, Ron and the others would help," Lily said.

"Are you sure or do you hope?" Remus asked her. He also was angry at Harry facing this alone when there were older and more experienced students aboard.

Harry tried to break free and instantly felt pain as something hard was slammed into the back of his head. Dropping his wand, Harry felt his body go limp as he struggled to maintain consciousness. He couldn't pass out. Passing out would be the end of him.

Approaching footsteps filled Harry's ears. "It's about time," an angry voice hissed. "We need to get out of here."

Pounding could be heard from the train, sounding like fists slamming against an unbreakable surface. Harry could only assume that those still on the train were watching everything that was happening. *Come on Potter! Move!* He couldn't let this happen. He couldn't let them take him. He would never see Sirius, Remus, Ron or Hermione again. *No! I'm stronger than this! I have to be!*

An intense sensation of power flooded Harry, pushing away any dizziness. It was similar to the minor outbursts he had felt during the summer but instead of waiting for it to pass Harry knew he needed to use it. It was his only hope now. Before either Death Eater knew what was going on, Harry twisted his body over so he was facing upward, freeing his right arm and

silently called his wand with his extended hand. Grasping his wand a moment later, Harry jumped to his feet then jumped in the air, bringing his leg up and kicking his kidnapper in the face. As the kidnapper stumbled back, Harry turned to the accomplice and fired a quick stunning spell followed by a body binding spell.

"Yes!" Sirius cried and they all started to cheer Harry on.

The accomplice fell to the ground as Harry returned his attention to the kidnapper just in time to avoid being hit by a stunning spell. The duel began. The Death Eater fired curse after curse while Harry deflected or maneuvered out of the way, flipping when it was absolutely necessary. It only took ten minutes before Harry's chest started to ache. He was sweating and breathing heavily. Harry knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer. He needed to take the offensive, staying defensive was getting him nowhere.

Lily was chewing on a lock of her own hair desperately.

Stepping to the right, Harry fired a body binding spell as the Death Eater fired the Reductor curse. Both moved to avoid being hit but the Death Eater predicted this and fired another Reductor curse...one that Harry didn't notice until it was too late. It struck Harry hard at his right side. Pain screamed throughout his body as Harry fell to his knees, grabbing his right side in a desperate attempt to hold in as much blood as he could.

"No, no, no, this is not good," Sirius mumbled.

Gasping for breath, Harry looked up to see the Death Eater approaching as rain started to fall around them. His outburst had left him long ago but he was only realizing it now. Sitting on his knees, Harry watched as the Death Eater took one slow step after another towards him. Harry had his right hand resting on the ground, appearing to balance him but he was actually hiding his wand. This was his last chance. He could only hope to take the Death Eater by surprise.

"Not so powerful now, are we Potter?" the Death Eater spat as he took another step. "Don't worry; we're not going to kill you...yet. We just need to find out what you did to our Master."

Come on, come on, Harry silently urged. The Death Eater took another cautious step followed by another. Just after the third step, Harry quickly pointed his wand at the Death Eater and shouted. "*Stupefy*" followed by "*Petrificus Totalus*". The Death Eater's limbs snapped to his

sides as he fell to the ground, stiff as a board. Harry let out a sigh of relief as he lowered his arm.

"WELL DONE HARRY!" Remus cried.

He glanced tiredly at the train as the rainfall started to increase before closing his eyes and collapsing to the ground.

"Someone help! You people in the train get a move!" James yelled.

The shatter of glass could be heard through the clearing. Too exhausted to move, Harry could only listen. He heard chatter breakout before the sound of hurried footsteps approaching. Harry let out a groan as two sets of hands carefully rolled him onto his back. "Just hang on, Harry," said the voice of Fred Weasley as arms burrowed underneath his shoulders and legs. With one fluid motion he was lifted into the air and carried back to the train.

Harry was completely soaked by the time he was pulled back into the train by awaiting students. Fred and George climbed back in and once again picked Harry up as carefully as possible. The window was repaired as Fred and George carried Harry out of the compartment and down the hallway which was a tight fit but somehow the twins managed. Harry was fighting to stay awake at that moment because he knew they weren't out of danger yet.

"Harry, you are hurt. Let them deal with any danger," Lily scolded.

"In here," Hermione's voice said urgently.

Fred and George entered a large compartment and carefully set Harry down on a chair that looked like it had been enlarged so Harry's entire body could fit on it. Harry let out a moan as he felt someone pull his hand away from his wound and slowly lift his shirt up. Several hisses and gasps could be heard as the observers caught sight of the wound. Harry felt something wet and warm pressed against his injured side causing him to inhale sharply as the pain flared throughout his body.

"I'm sorry Harry!" Hermione said quickly.

Harry shook his head slowly as he opened his eyes completely and saw the crowd around him. Struggling to steady his breath, Harry looked directly at Hermione since she was the closest. "You need to send...word to Dumbledore," he said tiredly. "The driver is dead. Send Hedwig. Tell her I'm hurt. She'll know what to do."

"I'll do it," Ginny said then hurried out of the carriage.

Harry noticed Ron was standing behind Hermione with a shocked look on his face. "Ron, find my trunk," he said sounding a little more coherent. "Find the mirror and contact Sirius. He can be here faster than Dumbledore. Take Fred and George if you need help." The three Weasley boys nodded and ran out of the carriage. Harry closed his eyes and let his head rest against the chair as a wave of dizziness hit him. The blood loss was starting to get to him. "Round up the upperclassmen and disperse among the younger years. The first years must be terrified by now."

A gentle hand rested on his forehead. "Don't worry Harry," said the voice of Angelina Johnson, a seventh year Gryffindor and a member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. "We'll take care of it. Save your strength. We need our Seeker if we want to win the Quidditch Cup this year." She then stood up and faced the crowd. "You heard Harry. We have a responsibility to those younger than us. Seventh years find a first year compartment and stay there. Sixth years you have second years and fifth years you have third years. Hermione and the Weasleys can stay here with Harry until help arrives."

"You heard her now let's move," a tenor voice announced. "Head boy and Head girl should patrol the hallway just to be safe."

Lily flinched as a shoe slammed in the wall.

"Hum, Sirius, mate, you okay?" Remus asked.

"What? They couldn't figure all that by their own? It's not any stroke of genius, get help see if anyone is injured. Anyone could think of that! But noooooo, they need injured Harry to tell them or else they just stand there like idiots!" he growled angrily.

James and Lily nodded.

"They're kids. They're not used to this and were scared," Remus tried to reason but it didn't work that much since he too was angry about Harry having to take care of everybody.

Everyone but Hermione filed out of the compartment, talking quietly to each other. Harry did pick up a few 'I can't believe this happened' and several 'did you see what he did?' comments but didn't have the energy to figure out who was saying them. His mind felt like a cloudy mess. Harry knew that if another threat came he would be helpless and that scared him more than he would ever admit. He hated being helpless. He hated being a victim.

Shortly after everyone left Ginny returned, pulled up a chair and took hold of Harry's left hand since Harry was still holding his wand in his right. "Hedwig is on her way," she explained. "I don't know how fast she will get there in this rain but if any owl can do it, Hedwig can."

"Sirius is going to be so angry," Hermione said nervously. "We never should have let you go alone to check on the driver, Harry."

"No you shouldn't," Lily crossed her arms, "Now feel Padfoot's wrath!"

How could we have been so stupid? Who else would have Dementors attack the train? We should have protected you. Remus and Sirius are never going to forgive us...they're never going to forgive Professor Dumbledore. Oh no! They're going to pull you out of school!"

"Should have never let him back," Sirius mumbled and James nodded.

"You're going to be his pet now right Paddy?" James said.

"Of course!"

"Hermione, shut up!" Ginny said in annoyance. "We're supposed to keep Harry calm by not panicking!"

"Hermione's panicking?" Ron asked as he entered to carriage. "Miss voice-of-reason is panicking?" He pulled up a chair and sat down next to Ginny. "Sirius and Remus are on their way. Remus said he would contact the Order once he calmed Sirius down enough to Apparate. It was a good thing my mum wasn't the one contacting him. She would have washed his mouth out with soap...repeatedly. Oh, Fred and George are standing guard outside...just in case."

"For the first time I won't berate Sirius for his language," Lily said.

Harry partially opened his eyes and looked at Ron. "Thanks," he said softly then closed his eyes again. He knew he needed to keep talking or he would pass out. "It looks like you were right, Hermione. I wasn't strong enough."

"Er—Harry, I don't think you realize what happened," Hermione said carefully. "We saw the duel. You were amazing. None of us would have lasted as long as you did. Those were Death Eaters and you...well...you got hurt but you beat both of them. You haven't even taken your OWL's yet and you beat two Death Eaters in a duel!"

"Harry may have been amazing but I still fail to see how two Death Eaters alone would have been able to overcome hundreds of armed students even if they were not fully qualified yet," Remus said annoyed.

"That would have required for someone to say: 'Hey, let me go with you' instead of 'Go on, save us all'," James huffed.

"It's a good thing Remus and Sirius gave you all of those private lessons," Ron added. "Er— other than where you were hit, are you okay, Harry? I mean, it seemed like you were in pain while you were dueling."

Harry thought for a moment. It was really hard to determine if anything else hurt with the pain searing from his side. He knew what Ron was talking about. Ron wanted to know if the Dementors and facing the Death Eaters had been too much for his heart to handle. He remembered the pain from his chest while dueling but honestly couldn't say he felt any pain in that area now. "I'll be fine, Ron," Harry said at last. "Don't worry."

"WHERE IS HE?" shouted a voice that Harry and the Weasleys knew all too well.

"In here, Sirius," answered the nervous George Weasley.

"Sirius is there now James," Lily said patting James, "He'll make everything well again."

Sirius puffed his chest proudly and Remus rolled his eyes.

Sirius entered the carriage and inhaled sharply at the sight in front of him. Harry lying on an oversized chair with his shirt pulled up to his chest while Hermione was holding a blood soaked rag to a wound on Harry's right side. Ron and Ginny instantly moved out of the way so Sirius could hurry to Harry's side. Harry partially opened his tired eyes to see Sirius' concerned face.

Forcing a smile, Sirius ran his fingers through Harry's hair. "It's okay now, Pronglet," he said softly. "Moony will be here soon with help." He then turned to the three watching teenagers. "Where are those Aurors? I'm going to kill them."

"What Aurors? And may I help?" James asked.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny stared at Sirius in confusion. "What Aurors?" Hermione asked. "We contacted you first because of the mirror Harry had."

Sirius' eyes narrowed in anger. "There were supposed to be two Aurors on this train to protect you kids," he hissed. "Dumbledore assured me all of you would have at least some protection. Do you mean to tell me there was no sort of protection on this train whatsoever? He left a train of *children* to defend themselves against Dementors and Death Eaters?"

James dropped the book and got up walking to the door.

Lily got up and held him by the arm, "James, where are you going?"

"I am going to have a few choice words with a certain crazy old Headmaster."

Remus, who had joined them, helped Lily usher James back to his spot saying calmly as if talking to a small child or a very unstable person, "I don't think that would work very efficiently. Why don't we keep reading?" he finished handing James back the book.

"Er...well...we really didn't defend ourselves," Ron said as he avoided Sirius' gaze.

"No, you didn't," Sirius huffed.

"Harry defended us. He told us to stay in our compartments when the Dementors came then went to talk to the driver about it.

"I know Harry told you but there is such thing as free will. You could have just not listened to him!" Lily cried annoyed.

That's when the Death Eaters came. They—er—dragged Harry out and did something to the train so we were all stuck in here."

Sirius let out a low growl. Harry let out a moan as he reached over and touched Sirius' arm. He couldn't stand his friends paying the price for a choice he made. "It's not their fault, Sirius," Harry muttered. "We didn't know Death Eaters were here."

Returning his attention to his godson, Sirius let out a sigh and buried his face in Harry's hair as he wrapped an arm around Harry's upper body so not to cause any further pain to his godson. "I know, Pronglet," he said softly. "This wasn't supposed to happen. You shouldn't have to defend a train full of children. You're still a kid too, you know."

"Sometimes I don't think he does," Remus sighed as he scribbled something on his parchment.

"They're in here, Remus!" Fred called out alerting Harry and Sirius that Remus had arrived with help.

Sirius pulled away as Remus ran into the carriage and fell to his knees at Harry's side. He pulled the bloodied cloth away and winced at the sight of Harry's wound. "Just hang on, cub," Remus said gently. "We'll have you fixed up in no time. Don't worry. Tonks is outside with some help taking care of your attackers. She was almost as bad as you, Sirius, when I told her what happened. I swear you Blacks have quite a temper when someone you care about is in trouble."

"Not funny Moony," Sirius warned.

Sirius glared at Remus.

"Who said I was making a joke?" Remus countered. "Sirius, prop him up so I can bandage him. We need to stop the bleeding."

"Good thing Moony arrived. He always knows what to do," Sirius said pleasantly and Remus blushed.

Harry felt an arm pry under his shoulders and slowly pull him upwards so his upper body wasn't on the chair. Pain flared throughout Harry's body causing him to wince as his head tilted to the left and rested against Sirius' shoulder. Harry let his eyes close as he started to drift off. Help had come. Sirius said something to Remus but it sounded too muffled to make out. Everything seemed to fade away...including the pain as Harry lost consciousness.

"I don't think that's very good," Lily said worried.

"Don't fret. Harry will be fine!" James tried to sound confident but his hand was shaking as he turned the page.

XXXX

A/N- Puft! She wipes her forehead. That was one freakishly long chapter. Twice as long as usual. Sorry it took so long but I didn't want to break it. As usual thank you all for reading and reviewing. I love all the reviews I get and check my e-mail constantly just to see if I'm pleasing you. I think I'll have to join RAA (Review Addicts Anonymous).

A/N2- I have a question. Reading BoAD again I've noticed that Ksomm814 repeats themes a lot. Which was great in the series, because you can't expect Harry to just suddenly be overconfident, but in the "Marauders read" it gets a little repetitive. So I am making a poll, I thought that maybe it would be more interesting to show only the highlights, parts where there would be interesting comments instead of commenting every paragraph even if it isn't anything new. Or would you rather I just keep going this way. To me it's okay either way, I just don't want you guys to get bored with my fic so tell me honestly what you prefer. I'll let the poll go for about two or three chapters. I am asking for you to answer on a Review because I want to know why you'd prefer one option or the other, also to enable non-members to vote too. So let me know.

Chapter 6

An Extremely Long Day

Distant voices slowly brought Harry out of his slumber. He felt warm in the soft bed and really didn't want to wake up but the clearing voices wouldn't let him drift back off. Rolling onto his left side, Harry pulled his covers tightly around him as he buried his face in the pillow. A soft pain shot through his right side as he moved but it quickly faded. It took Harry a long moment to remember why he was in pain in the first place. He remembered the attack on the Hogwarts Express. He remembered getting hit by a Reductor curse and he remembered the look on Sirius' face.

He had vowed not to cause his guardians any more pain and had broken that vow after a few hours.

Sirius extended one hand to Remus. Remus looked at it and raised an eyebrow.

"I have to add something to that list of yours Moony," Sirius said. Remus took the parchment and quill from his pocket and handed it to Sirius. Sirius furiously scribbled on the parchment as he muttered, 'hopeless'.

Was this what his life was going to be like now? It had been his first day 'out of hiding' and there had been an attempted kidnapping. The Death Eaters had made it clear that they would do whatever was necessary to find out what was wrong with their master. Did this mean his

life would revert back to the way it had been in his third year when everyone believed Sirius Black wanted him dead?

It wouldn't surprise me.

"I assure you, Mr. Black, *Professor* Umbridge only did what she felt was right!" exclaimed the voice of nervous voice of Cornelius Fudge. "She would never intentionally endanger the life of a student, especially the-boy-who-lived. How was she to know rouge Death Eaters would attack the train with Dementors?"

"Uhh, lemme see," James mocked tapped his chin, "Because Dumbledore *told you?*" he shrieked.

"*Rogue* Death Eaters?" Sirius's voice asked angrily. "These were not rogues. They wanted *my godson* for their master! For *Voldemort*! You were warned months ago and have you done anything? No! You leave *a child* to protect a train full of children! Get off your pompous arse and do something! How many more deaths will it take for you to realize that this isn't something you can shove under a rug?"

"No one can accuse Sirius of being tight lipped," Lily said biting a smile.

"*Mr. Black!*" Fudge exclaimed. "I understand you are upset for the injuries Mr. Potter sustained but we have no proof the attackers were following anyone's orders but their own! There have been no sightings of You-Know-Who in the past two months. Honestly, I don't know what you've been telling people, Dumbledore, but this has to stop. The public—"

Remus smacked his head and dropped on the bed. Holding his head with his hands he rocked from side to side on the bed moaning.

"Moony," James asked worried as Lily and Sirius got closer to Remus, "Are you hurt?"

"No," Remus moaned.

"Then why are you moaning?" Lily asked.

"Because Fudge is too much for anyone to stomach!" he moaned.

"—has the right to know that a feared killer has returned," Dumbledore calmly interrupted. "You are playing directly into Voldemort's plans. He wants the wizarding world to be

unprepared for his return. If you still refuse to believe that we have entered dangerous times than you have doomed the wizarding world before the war has even begun.”

“Now, now, Dumbledore,” Fudge said in annoyance. “There is no need to be overdramatic. The attackers have been dealt with. They will serve no further threat to Mr. Potter or anyone else. Mr. Potter will receive a formal gratification from the Ministry for his services. When he is healthy, I’m sure Professor Umbridge will be able to take his statement concerning the events that occurred in June.”

“Unbelievable!” Sirius cried.

“He can’t do that!” James bellowed.

“I’m afraid we can’t allow that,” Remus said instantly. “It would be a conflict of interest. *Professor Umbridge* is Harry’s teacher. It is her duty to instruct Harry in the ways of Defense Against the Dark Arts, nothing more, nothing less. The ‘events that occurred in June’ are none of her business.”

“You tell him Moony!” Lily cheered.

“Dolores Umbridge is a Ministry employee!” Fudge exclaimed.

“Not anymore,” Remus countered calmly. “When you appointed her as the Defense teacher she waved her responsibilities and privileges as your Undersecretary. She has not forfeited her position but she may not act as both. After all, considering what happened yesterday, the stress on her to teach her students to defend themselves must be incredible.”

Sirius hugged Remus, “Ah Moony, I love that way you have of making people feel like idiots... when it’s not directed at me of course,” he added as an afterthought.

“Not just her,” Sirius added. “You, Fudge, were the one that appointed her. *Professor Umbridge’s* teaching abilities will reflect highly on you. I’m sure when everyone learns that an entire train of children ranging in the ages of eleven to seventeen had to rely on *one fifteen-year-old child* the parents will demand for their children to be taught how to defend themselves. I would say that *Professor Umbridge* has her work cut out for her.”

“And why do I have the feeling that Sirius will be sending the letters informing the parents *personally*?” Lily asked approvingly.

"N—now s—see here, Black!" Fudge stuttered. "I will not be threatened like this!

"Who threatened you?" Remus asked, "Sirius merely pointed out a fact."

You have interfered with investigation after investigation. I should have you arrested and thrown back into your cell at Azkaban! You *claimed* that Potter wasn't ready to talk in June yet he had told all of you—"

"Harry said nothing to us then since he couldn't talk!" Sirius shouted angrily. "We saw his memory!"

Fudge's eyes widened at the statement. **"You used a Pensieve?"** he asked nervously. **"W—why didn't you say so? We could have avoided so many of the—er—unpleasantries that occurred in the past few months. I—er—trust you still have Mr. Potter's memory in this Pensieve?"**

"No," Remus quickly answered for Sirius. **"We thought it would be best not to risk anyone from viewing the memory for their own benefit or worse, to use what happened against Harry. He had witnessed the murder of a good friend and needed to deal with it properly. If you want, we could wake Harry and ask him if he will let you see what happened. At least it would extinguish any doubt to what happened that night. "**

They all snorted.

"Like he'll want proof that he's wrong!" Sirius said rolling his eyes.

Harry slowly opened his eyes and glanced over his shoulder at the four blurry wizards in the dimly lit hospital wing. Even with his poor vision Harry noticed that Fudge was shifting his weight nervously. Sirius and Remus had pushed him into a corner. If he witnessed the memory then there was no denying the fact that Voldemort had returned. "What proof do I have that Mr. Potter's memories haven't been altered?" Fudge asked suspiciously. "You have had Potter in your care for months. For all I know you had him Obliviated to believe what you want him to believe."

"Okay, I seriously hope I never meet this guy because I am one second away from hexing him into oblivion!" James grunted.

"We would *never* do that to Harry!" Sirius exclaimed as he approached Fudge and grabbed him by the cloak. "How dare you accuse us such a thing? If you weren't so bloody stubborn

you would accept the truth! GET OUT! DON'T YOU EVER COME NEAR MY GODSON OR I SWEAR THE ENTIRE MINISTRY WILL LEARN WHAT A POMPOUS OAF YOU REALLY ARE!"

"I agree that Fudge is irritating but that will not help matters Sirius!" Lily scolded. Sirius shrugged. He actually was very envious of his future self right now.

Remus managed to pry Sirius and Fudge apart allowing the Minister to hurry out of the hospital wing. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to sleep anymore, Harry rolled onto his back, letting out a hiss when pain once again flared from his right side in the process. The small noise was enough to alert the remaining wizards in the room that Harry was indeed awake.

Sirius and Remus rushed to Harry's bedside as Harry tried to sit up and instantly pushed him back down. "Not so fast Harry," Remus said gently. "You're body is still healing from that curse. Poppy's done everything she can to heal your wound but there were some muscles that were severely injured. It will take a little time before they heal completely."

Harry let out a sigh as he looked up at the blurry faces of his guardians. He could only imagine the worried looks that had to be on their faces, what they had been going through since he had passed out. "What time is it?" he asked in a scratchy voice.

"It's almost half past four in the morning," Sirius answered sounding a lot calmer then just a moment ago. "I'm sorry for waking you up. I just couldn't control myself anymore. You can only handle so much Fudge before you start to feel ill."

"Here, here," the four said together.

Harry had to smile at the comment. Trust Sirius to start cracking jokes. His smile faded when he remembered why his guardians felt the need to protect him in the first place. He had caused his guardians so much worry because a madman's followers wanted information he couldn't provide. "I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "I don't mean to cause so much trouble. They wanted to know what I did to Voldemort. They killed the driver to get to me."

Sirius gently pulled Harry into an embrace as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "Now you listen to me, Pronglet," he said firmly. "You can't start blaming yourself for what happened yesterday. It's because of you that no one else was hurt. Even after you were injured you took charge and made sure someone called for help. You didn't panic even though you were in a lot of pain. We are proud of how you handled yourself but that doesn't mean we want you to

start risking your life like that. Your heart is still healing and besides, I don't think ours could handle it if something happened to you."

"Okay, I just have to say this," Lily said, "That was very mature of you Sirius."

"Thank you," Sirius said puffing his chest.

"There's a first time for everything," she finished and Sirius scowled as the other two laughed.

Harry returned the embrace, his head resting against the chest of his godfather. He knew Sirius was right but that didn't stop him from feeling guilty that someone has lost their life. "You can't save everyone," Remus had told him. "Attempting to do so would only drive you mad." Maybe someday Harry would be able to accept the fact that people dying at the hands of Voldemort and his followers wasn't his fault. Today just wasn't that day.

Two and a half hours later Harry found himself in the Great Hall trying to focus on anything but the long conversation he just had with his guardians. He couldn't believe that Professor Umbridge had canceled the Auror placement on the train. Both Fudge and Umbridge had claimed that they had no way of knowing that the train would be attacked and simply thought Professor Dumbledore's request was unnecessary. 'An unfortunate mistake' was what it had been called.

Sirius and Remus had repeated their warnings about Umbridge and the Ministry before they left. They seemed even more nervous about the new teacher with the events that had happened the day before. Harry wanted to believe that they were overreacting but the problem was it was a rare case that Sirius and Remus overreacted together.

"I know," Remus said with a suffering sigh.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sirius asked narrowing his eyes.

"That you overreact all the time Padfoot but Moony doesn't. So, if Moony is overreacting too, it has to be serious," James explained calmly.

"I do not overreact!" Sirius cried.

"Of course not," Lily pacified him and then she said in a loud whisper to James, "Do you *want* him to make a scene?" Lily was the one ducking pillows now.

Could Professor Umbridge really be that bad? Harry wouldn't know for certain until he had a class with her.

Turning the page of the book he was trying to read, Harry couldn't help but think about what had happened in the past day, especially the events that happened after he passed out. The two Death Eaters had been taken to the Ministry but somehow killed themselves before they could be questioned. The Dark Mark had been found on their left forearm revealing them as Death Eaters but so far their identities hadn't been disclosed to the public. This had been a severe blow to the Order. All of the proof that Voldemort had returned had been so close. Now there was nothing stopping Fudge from having the 'Daily Prophet' publishing whatever he wanted.

The only problem was the fact that a fifteen-year-old student was the one that defeated them, something that everyone on the train and the Ministry officials that came to the 'rescue' knew. There was also the attack in itself. Remus and Sirius had been right when they pointed out that parents will demand action to be taken. There was no doubt that owls would be leaving in the dozens if they hadn't already. Students will want their parents to know that the-boy-who-lived had saved them. *So much for not attracting attention.*

"I think parents will be more angry at the fact that their kids were left unprotected," Lily said calmly.

"Yeah, but will they believe Fudge or Dumbledore?" Remus asked skeptically.

Sitting up straight, Harry let out a wince and instinctively grabbed his right side as pain flared. The potion he had taken to help with his heart condition couldn't be mixed with any pain relieving potions meaning Harry would have to simply deal with the pain for a few days. *It's going to be a long few days.* Since Harry was now at Hogwarts that meant it was easier for Madam Pomfrey to examine him. Every morning before breakfast Harry had to report to the hospital wing for his daily potion and for Madam Pomfrey to check on his still healing muscles. Rest was advised but with classes starting today Harry knew there was little chance of that happening.

Deep in his own thoughts, Harry didn't even realize he wasn't alone until someone plopped down on the seat to his right followed by someone doing the same on the seat to his right. There were only two people who could do the identical action like that. "Morning, Fred, George," Harry said softly.

There was a brief silence. "You okay, Harry?" asked Fred. There was a touch of nervousness to his voice that really didn't suit the cheerful Fred that Harry was familiar with. "We tried to visit last night but Remus and Sirius said you weren't going to wake up soon. I think the entire Gryffindor House was in shock last night. I don't think a lot of them believed that it's dangerous out there."

"I don't think it was just the Gryffindors," George said, his tone sounding exactly like his brother's. "It was really quiet during the Welcoming Feast. For once no one cared about eating. They just wanted to know if you were okay. I think seeing you collapse outside the train really hit people hard. People were panicking when we couldn't get through the doors and windows to help you, Harry. We really wanted to help, you know that right?"

"I know," Harry said softly.

"Well, I didn't," Sirius huffed crossing his arms. The other three scowled with him.

He could still hear the sounds of the students pounding against the glass in frustration. Facing the Death Eaters had been bad enough. Watching someone face them and being unable to help must have been unbearable. They must have felt so helpless.

"All the pounding after they were stuck was all nice and all but it doesn't change the fact that not one of them offered to go with Harry check on the driver," Lily huffed.

"It all worked out though, right? It's over and done with so let's please talk about something else."

"I hate how Harry dismisses it like it was his job to save everyone. He should say, 'Yeah, you should have come', so maybe next time they actually do," James scowled.

"That's just not Harry," Sirius said annoyed, "And it's all Dumbledore's fault!"

"Sirius," Remus asked, "How exactly is it Dumbledore's fault?"

"Dumbledore left Harry with the Dursleys," Sirius started ticking off things with his fingers, "Dumbledore let Harry fight off Voldemort and Basilisks in his school instead of doing it himself."

"We still don't know how that happened exactly so maybe there is a reason," Remus started saying but quickly shut up when his three friends crossed their arms and glared furiously at him.

Fred and George took the hint and informed Harry that Angelina was the new Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. Tryouts for a new Keeper were scheduled on Friday at five in the afternoon and attendance from current team members was required. Harry was surprised that tryouts were so early but he figured that Angelina wanted plenty of time to train the new Keeper properly.

It wasn't long before students started filing into the Great Hall and every single one of them noticed Harry sitting in between of the Weasley twins. Some gathered the courage to approach the-boy-who-lived and thank him while others just stared and whispered. Gryffindors quickly took the nearest open spot by Harry. Students of the later years talked to Harry like they were old friends while the younger years simply stared at Harry in admiration, appearing to be too nervous to say a word.

"Knowing Harry he is *loving* that," Lily snorted sarcastically.

Harry did his best to ignore the attention and respond with a kind smile to everyone who said 'hello' regardless of how annoyed he was starting to feel. *This is the price you have to pay for taking matters into your own hands*, he thought bitterly. The unwanted attention was all the motivation Harry needed to think before taking charge again. He hated that people considered him a hero when he was just trying to survive.

Ron and Hermione arrived just as hundreds of owls entered the Hall with the morning mail. Students generously moved so Ron and Hermione could sit near their friend but with so many people around they really couldn't say much to each other. The attack on the Hogwarts Express covered the front page of the 'Daily Prophet' along with the majority of the second. Questions concerning the safety of the wizarding world's children were repeated over and over again. Apparently the world wasn't as safe as the Ministry had been saying.

"At least not everyone is believing Fudge!" James cried relieved.

Harry didn't even attempt to reading the article. The glances he received by everyone was enough to know his actions yesterday had been mentioned. Knowing that he was fairly close to losing his patience, Harry waited long enough to receive his timetable then left the Hall without saying a word. He needed to gather his materials he would need for his morning classes and looking at his schedule, Harry could only groan. History of Magic was first followed by double Potions, Divination and concluded with double Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was certainly going to be a long day.

History of Magic seemed to pass by slower than one could ever imagine although Harry figured it was probably that way because he didn't fall asleep in class. His head seemed to be too full with worries to even consider it. Professor Binns didn't notice Harry's lack of attention or the fact that the majority of the students in his class were asleep. The teacher was a ghost and didn't bother with anything except for droning on about giant wars which was today's topic. Taking notes when he actually listened, Harry ignored the worried glances he noticed Ron and Hermione were giving him. They knew how much Harry hated attention but really couldn't do anything about it.

By the time class was over Harry had learned what sitting positions caused pain and which ones caused considerably less. There was a constant ache now, something that Harry tried desperately to hide. He was trying to focus on anything except the pain but the moment he did Harry would move and a flare of pain brought him back to what he was trying to forget. It seemed to be a never-ending cycle.

The journey to the dungeons for Potion's class had been a quiet one. The lack of bickering from Ron and Hermione proved that they were more worried about Harry than whatever differences they may have. Hermione's comment yesterday about his health seemed to leave an uncomfortable tension amongst them. From the looks Ron and Hermione were giving each other Harry could only assume that he had most likely missed a rather large argument.

"Harry, Harry, Harry, count your blessings. You *do not* want to be around when they argue," Sirius shook his head.

Entering the Potions classroom, Harry, Ron and Hermione took their usual seats in the far back. Professor Snape had made a habit of ridiculing Harry for everything, something Harry really didn't know if he could handle today. It was taking a lot of self control not to act on his frustrations and even more to keep his anger from surfacing. He didn't know why but the whispers were really affecting him more than usual today. *I should be used to this by now.*

The sound of the door shutting pulled Harry out of his thoughts. "Settle down everyone," Professor Snape said coldly as he walked to the front of the classroom. "As you all are aware, this coming June you will be taking your OWL exam which will prove how much has penetrated your thick skulls over the years. I expect every single one of you to accomplish at least an 'Acceptable' rating no matter how impossible it may seem. For your information, I only take the best for my NEWT Potions class, meaning that there will be a considerable number of you that will not be taking this class next year."

"Charming as always," Remus snorted.

Snape glanced at the majority of the Gryffindor students, his gaze lingering on Neville and Harry a bit longer than the others but Harry was preoccupied to care. He tiredly met Snape's stare for a moment before looking away. He didn't have the energy to stand up to Professor Snape right now, something Harry was certain Snape noticed because the man's gaze lacked the usual loathing Snape reserved only for Harry.

"Now Harry, I am sure you have already been in the presence of Snape and Padfoot at the same time and know that the loathing he has in his gaze reserved for Sirius is much more intense," Lily said calmly.

"The feeling is mutual," Sirius mumbled.

"The potion you will be making today will be on the Ordinary WIZARDING Level exam: the Draught of Peace," Snape said as he pulled out his wand. "This potion calms anxiety and soothes agitation. The measurements have to be exact or you risk putting the drinker into a deep and possibly permanent sleep." Snape flicked his wand at the black board then flicked his wand at the door to the store cupboard. "The ingredients are on the blackboard. You will find your materials in the store cupboard. You have an hour and a half to complete this so get moving."

"If he had stopped at "complete this" he wouldn't have been rude," Remus pointed out and James said shocked:

"But then it wouldn't be Snivellus Moony!"

As everyone went to the cupboard, Harry quickly wrote down everything he would need, double checking that he had everything right. He had found that it was easier for him to have the list of ingredients and steps he had to follow in front of him rather than relying on the blackboard. Once Harry was certain he had everything written down correctly he collected his supplies and got started.

Concentrating on the difficult potion seemed to be exactly what Harry needed to take his mind off of everything. He followed every step, not adding materials before he was absolutely certain the measurement was correct, stirring the exact number of times in one direction before changing just like the instructions said so. He had the timer set on his watch so he knew exactly when to add the final ingredient.

With only ten minutes remaining, Snape addressed the class. "You all should be seeing a light silver vapor rising from your potion," he announced.

Focusing on his own potion and not those around him, Harry assumed that the vapor from his potion was silver. It looked silver to Harry but he knew that the critique of color was left to the eye of the examiner. He could hear Professor Snape strolling from potion to potion. He stopped at Hermione's for a moment to smell it but moved on without saying a word. When Snape reached Harry's potion, Harry moved out of the way, waiting for the inevitable downgrading that was bound to come.

Like Hermione's Professor Snape took a sniff of the potion then moved closer to Harry. "See me after class, Potter," he hissed then moved on. "Fill one flagon with a sample of your attempt at this potion. Label it with your name and leave it at my desk for testing. Your homework: twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making, due on Thursday."

"His potion is right why would he need to see him after class?" Sirius cried outraged.

"He's just being his usual self Padfoot," Remus said, "What did you expect?"

Harry did as he was told, filling his flagon, corking it before leaving it at Professor Snape's desk. To everyone he appeared to be calm and collected but mentally Harry was panicking. Had he done something wrong? Did Snape believe he had cheated on his potion? Was Snape going to start yelling about what happened yesterday? Snape's degrading remarks were the last thing Harry needed right now.

"Snivellus has no right whatsoever of yelling at Harry about what happened," James scowled.

"I hate to point out the obvious *again* but here goes: When did that ever stop him?" Remus asked.

After telling Ron and Hermione he would catch up, Harry waited for everyone to leave then slowly approached Professor Snape's desk. *Might as well get it over with.* "You wanted to see me, sir?" Harry asked softly.

"To be fair," Lily pointed out, "I don't think he ever wants to see Harry."

The others nodded.

Professor Snape met Harry's gaze for a long moment. "You're in pain, Potter," he stated coldly.

"Well done Sherlock. You are such a genius," Lily snorted.

"Who's Sherlock?" James asked and Sirius shrugged. Remus and Lily both slapped their own foreheads in despair.

"Your escapade yesterday has obviously left something behind. Why haven't you seen Madam Pomfrey for a pain reducing potion?"

Harry's gaze fell as he bit his lower lip nervously. "Because it doesn't react well with my—er—other potion, sir," he said. "Madam Pomfrey said I'll just have to deal with the pain for a few days until I heal completely." Harry slowly looked up at Professor Snape as saw the man's eyes narrowing as he inhaled deeply as if to calm himself down.

"I see," Snape muttered through his teeth. "It appears that no one with your—*condition* was ever foolish enough to try a stunt like you did." Professor Snape rubbed his chin as he thought for a moment before returning his attention to the teenager. "Very well, Potter. You may go."

"So let me understand this," Sirius said slowly, "Snivellus made Harry stay behind, was his usual snarky self and didn't even have some kind of solution for the problem?"

"Yes," Lily answered.

"What a git!" Sirius cried.

"Another Sherlock," Lily pointed out.

"Who is this Sherlock bloke?" James cried.

"We'll let you figure that one out by yourself," Remus answered calmly and James and Sirius huffed annoyed.

"Yes, sir," Harry said in the same soft voice then left the classroom. The journey to the Great Hall had been a long one. He had to admit that Professor Snape had acted strangely. The hook-nosed, greasy haired man usually used every opportunity to bash the late James Potter but not today. Why? Snape's animosity towards Harry was a well-known fact at Hogwarts.

The Gryffindors hated it, the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs sympathized while the Slytherins thought it was hilarious since plenty of them hated Harry almost as much as Professor Snape did.

Lunch passed similarly to breakfast but this time Harry was in no mood to talk to anyone. Perhaps it was the dreary weather outside or maybe it was just Harry felt like his head was going to burst, he really didn't know. All Harry knew was that he was in pain and he was exhausted but still had two more classes to attend. Divination could be an easy class to skip but Harry didn't want to miss his first Defense Against the Dark Arts class. He also didn't think it would settle well if he was missing classes already, regardless of how he felt.

"Yes," Remus said grimly. "I bet some of the Slytherin's are quite eager to report any strange behavior from Harry and missing class would probably count."

The moment Ron had finished eating Harry left with his friend for the Divination classroom. They traveled to the North Tower in silence, passing the large picture of Sir Cadogan, the annoying knight who wanted to duel with everyone that passed. For some reason Sir Cadogan couldn't accept the fact that he wasn't an actual person and therefore unable to duel anyone.

Harry and Ron reached the trapdoor at the top of the North Tower and climbed up the silver ladder, Ron insisting that Harry go first. Entering the room, Harry was instantly hit by the overwhelming aromas of whatever Professor Trelawney had been burning. His eyes started to water as he stumbled, only to be caught by Ron. Harry quickly remembered why he hated this class so much. Trelawney seemed to have a love for predicting Harry's death. She had large glasses and had a tendency of reminding Harry of some sort of insect. She also had the tendency to be not entirely there at times but so did Professor Dumbledore so that wasn't saying much.

Gathering his bearings, Harry muttered a 'thanks' to Ron before sitting down at a small round table in the back of the class. He noticed a battered leather-bound book on the table but left it where it was. Class was going to begin soon enough. Ron sat down beside him as the rest of the class filtered in, talking quickly as they sat down, all of them unaware of where Harry and Ron were. Sitting in the back of a barely lit classroom certainly had its benefits.

"I know," James said happily, "It's perfect for plotting pranks."

"Harry does not plot pranks James," Lily huffed.

"He should," he said seriously.

"Good afternoon," Professor Trelawney said the dreamy voice she usually spoke in. "Welcome back to Divination. I have been monitoring all of your fortunes, especially with the omens I have been seeing lately. I am happy to announce that I have not seen the Grim in any of your paths but trying times are ahead of you. Some of you will face more challenges than others; I can not deny what I see."

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance at Trelawney's statement. Professor Trelawney couldn't see what was right in front of her much less the future of everyone in the class. "Vague that up a bit, why don't you," Harry muttered causing Ron to snort in agreement.

"On your tables is a copy of The Dream Oracle, by Inigo Imago," Trelawney continued having not heard Harry's comment. "The interpretation of dreams is one of the most important aspects of divining the future. Please read the introduction then divide into pairs and use The Dream Oracle to interpret your partner's most recent dream. Begin."

The class got to work, reading in the old books which took nearly the remainder of the class time. Ron instantly turned to Harry with a hopeful look on his face. Harry didn't like that look at all. "I can never remember any of my dreams," Ron said with a shrug. "Tell me one of yours."

"I don't think Harry dreams are up for interpretation in class Ronald," Remus said sternly crossing his arms.

"I think we both know what my dreams are about, Ron," Harry said quietly as he tried to keep any sort of irritation out of his voice. "Look up green light and screams in that book and see what you find."

Ron's eyes widened at the statement before he looked away with an ashamed look on his face. "Sorry Harry," he said softly. "I wasn't thinking."

"Obviously," Lily snorted.

As class ended Professor Trelawney assigned a dream journal for the next month. Everyone climbed down the ladder and walked to their next class. Almost everyone was grumbling about the overabundance of homework they all had been warned about how stressful OWL year was but no one expected this on the first day. This was just cruel.

"I know," James moaned. "Teachers are so cruel. They don't understand we need time for more important things."

"I don't think planning pranks is more important than your studies James," Lily huffed.

"But kissing you is," he said tilting his head with his eyes closed and his lips sticking out.

Remus and Sirius laughed freely when James' head was smacked by a pillow.

Entering the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Harry saw a short woman with short, curly brown hair. She had a face like a toad, her eyes were large and her mouth was wide. She had nearly no neck and was wearing a fluffy pink cardigan over her robes. Harry had to quickly look away to keep himself from staring at her—er—unique fashion. Somehow he understood immediately why Sirius and Remus had been warning about Professor Umbridge.

Lily was looking at the book horrified and couldn't even muster any comment to the description of the new teacher.

Harry sat between Ron and Hermione and pulled out his textbook: 'Defensive Magical Theory' by Wilbert Slinkhard. He tried to look anywhere but at Professor Umbridge and settled on flipping through the pages of his book. It just felt odd that he wasn't looking forward to his favorite class. Ever since his third year Defense had been the class Harry excelled in, of course it could be that way because that was when he started receiving private lessons during the summers.

"Yes Harry," Remus said smiling, "And of course having the best teacher ever helps."

Sirius and James just stared at Remus and Lily moaned, "Oh no, it's contagious. You two ruined him!"

As soon as everyone had taken their seat Professor Umbridge stood up and smiled at the class. "Good afternoon!" she exclaimed. Her hesitation signaled that she had wanted a reply better than the scattered ones she received. "Now, now that certainly will not do. I expect an attentive reply. Let's try again. Good afternoon, class!"

"Good afternoon Professor Umbridge," the class replied.

"Where does she think she is? Kindergarten?" James asked horrified.

"Much better," Umbridge said happily. "Now, wands away everyone and please pull out your quills." She waited patiently as everyone obeyed before pulling out her own wand and tapping it on the blackboard. Words suddenly appeared: Defence Against the Dark Arts A Return to Basic Principles. Umbridge turned back to face the class with a smile on her face. "Now, I must say your tutelage in the past has been unique to say the least. Not anymore. Now, copy this down, please."

"What is she implying?" Sirius said through gritted teeth.

"I hope she is referring to the first two Defense teachers they had and the fake Moody," Lily said narrowing her eyes.

Umbridge tapped the blackboard again. The writing disappeared and the words 'Course Aims' appeared with three sentences underneath it: Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic, learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used, and placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

Notes were taken in silence. Once Professor Umbridge was satisfied, she assigned the class to read the first chapter of their Defense book. Harry had already read the first few chapters of the boring book but didn't want to attract any unwanted attention from the new teacher so he just re-read the chapter. To keep his focus, Harry started to take notes on miscellaneous points the author made.

"Do you have a question about something in the chapter, dear?" Professor Umbridge asked curiously.

Harry looked up and saw Hermione's hand in the air. "Not about the chapter, Professor," Hermione said. "I have a question about the course aims. There is nothing written about *using* spells...defensive spells."

"Yes, good point," Sirius asked.

Professor Umbridge eyed Hermione for a moment. "What is your name, dear?" she asked.

"Hermione Granger," Hermione said.

Umbridge smiled. "Well, Miss Granger, I believe the aims are quite clear," she said sweetly. "I do believe there will be no situations in this classroom when you will need to use a defensive spell. Do you really expect to be attacked in class?"

"Not in class but you are supposed to be training them for when they are attacked," James said worried.

"That's the whole point of having them train in a controlled environment."

"You mean we're not going to use magic at all?" Ron exclaimed. "After what happened yesterday? We need to be able to defend ourselves!"

"Yes! Thank you Ron!" Sirius cried.

"Actually, I don't think-" Remus started but was cut off by James:

"But he is right!"

"Yes," Remus said calmly, "But antagonizing the Ministry's spy at Hogwarts right now is not a smart move James."

Professor Umbridge's eyes narrowed. "In my class, students raise their hands to speak, Mr.—?"

"Weasley," Ron said as he raised his hand.

Professor Umbridge smiled then turned away from him. Looking around the classroom Harry noticed that quite a few people had their hands in the air, most of them being Gryffindors. Returning his attention to the front, Harry also noticed that Ron and Hermione were looking at him in surprise, silently asking him why he wasn't questioning this sort of teaching like everyone else.

"Because he is smart and Remus told him to keep his head," Lily said and added at Sirius' glare, "Remus and Sirius. And Sirius."

"You have another question, Miss Granger?" Professor Umbridge asked.

Hermione inhaled deeply as she lowered her hand. "Professor, the entire point of Defense Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells so we can protect ourselves," she said. "What's so wrong with learning how to defend ourselves?"

"Bad move," Remus winced.

"Miss Granger, you are not a Ministry-trained expert in the Wizarding Educational System," Umbridge said in the same sweet voice. "Your curriculum has been decided by witches and

wizards older and cleverer than you. You will be learning *about* defensive spells in a completely *risk-free* way as you should have been for the past few years."

"No they shouldn't," Sirius huffed.

Harry felt his hands tighten into fists under his desk. That sort of teaching was bound to get everyone killed. How could the Ministry do this especially with what happened yesterday? Even if they didn't believe Voldemort is back the attack on the train should be enough proof that Voldemort isn't the only threat. The Ministry was really going to let the seventh years graduate without even practicing on how to defend themselves?

"Apparently," James scowled.

"Yes, you have a question, Mr.—?" Professor Umbridge asked in her sweet voice.

"Dean Thomas," Dean said as he lowered his hand. "Well, the problem is we won't always be in the classroom. We were attacked by Dementors yesterday and Harry was the only one who knew how to fight them. Shouldn't we be learning the skills necessary for us to handle whatever's out there?"

Professor Umbridge's eyes narrowed again as her smile faded. Everyone noticed as she glanced over at Harry before returning her attention to Dean. It was obvious that she was losing her patience. "Mr. Thomas, by learning the theory of defense you will understand how to perform the spells. It is very rare that any of you will ever encounter a Dementor at such a young age. When the Ministry feels you are all ready to handle the complexity of casting such advanced spells then it shall be taught to you."

Everyone watched as Umbridge strolled over to Harry's desk and stood in front of him. "The Ministry has its standards," she said firmly. "Just because a guardian chooses to teach their charge dangerous spells early that doesn't make it right. It's a shame that because an individual's problems with the Ministry that a child should pay the price."

"Excuse me? Did I understand what she just said?" Sirius growled.

"I believe you did," Lily huffed.

"I can't believe it!" James cried, "If Moony and Padfoot hadn't trained Harry they would have been all defenseless seeing as no one moved a finger to help, and she is saying that is a bad thing! Unbelievable!"

Harry stared straight ahead, desperately trying to keep his anger under control. His face remained an impassive mask but underneath his desk his hands were shaking. How could she talk about Sirius like that? The Ministry had ignored the law when they didn't give Sirius a trial. Sirius has every right to be angry with a system that sentenced him to twelve years of torture. How could she possibly believe that Sirius was to blame for what the Ministry had put him through?

"Yes, if Padfoot had wanted he would have had every right to sue the Ministry for everything they had!" Remus cried indignantly.

Everyone jumped as the vase on Professor Umbridge's desk shattered. Professor Umbridge instantly looked around at the class. "Who did that?" she asked quickly then took a step back when she saw that no one had a wand in their hand. "How odd," she muttered as she glanced at the vase before readdressing the class but appeared to be slightly nervous now. "As I was saying, by studying theory hard enough there is no reason any of you should have a problem with your OWLs this year." She looked around the class and noticed a hand was in the air. "Yes, Miss—?"

"Parvati Patil," Parvati said softly. "Professor, how can we possibly pass our practical OWL if we haven't practiced beforehand? Many of the counter curses and spells we need to know take hours of practice. The only reason Harry knows what he knows is because he had to for the third task in the Tournament last year."

"They keep bringing Harry into this and it's not going to help!" Remus huffed. "She wants to discredit him. She views him as her enemy and you keep giving her ammunition!"

Harry closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to keep himself calm. He had already lost control once and couldn't afford to do it again. Why did Parvati have to bring up the Tournament? *Don't think about it! Don't think about what happened!* Concentrating on his training, Harry pushed away his feelings and focused on what he could control. Professor Umbridge's opinion certainly wasn't on the list. Let her simply teach theory. He could train himself. He could hide in the Room of Requirement to practice and no one would be the wiser.

"Mr. Potter's *experiences* are not the basis of this class," Professor Umbridge said as she walked back to her desk and with a flick of her wand repaired the broken vase. "I know some of you believe the allegations that a certain Dark Wizard has returned from the dead but that is a lie. The Ministry of Magic has found no proof to these allegations. Yesterday's events appear to have all of you believing the worst. The rogue wizards that attacked your train and

Mr. Potter have been taken care of. You are in no further danger. Now, please continue reading chapter one."

Everyone reluctantly returned to reading in their books for the remainder of the class as Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk. Once again Harry took notes on selective points the author made and kept his eyes on his book. He didn't want to chance looking at Umbridge right now. It was clear that she hadn't expected so much resistance no matter how much she tried to hide it. She also hadn't expected Harry to remain silent and seemed to be a little disappointed that Harry didn't appear to be affected by the comments she made.

"Of course she is," Lily said. "She is just waiting for the opportunity to make an example of him and he didn't give her the chance."

As soon as class was over everyone scurried out of the room and headed for dinner. Students grumbled, still in denial that they wouldn't be physically practicing defense this year. It didn't take Ron and Hermione to realize that Harry wasn't partaking in ridiculing of Professor Umbridge and was walking a bit on the slow side which silenced any complaining they had.

"Harry, is something wrong?" Hermione asked quietly. "You've been really quiet today."

Pulling himself out of his thoughts, Harry looked at his friends and smiled softly. "I'm fine," he lied. "I'm just tired. With everything that's happened I think today took a lot out of me. I was up really early this morning talking to Sirius and Remus and we have loads of homework to do tonight."

"So is that why you didn't say anything in class?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "What would it have done?" he countered. "What would it have changed? Professor Umbridge has her own view on the current situation. I may not agree with it but you all proved that arguing wasn't making a difference. She's not going to listen to a bunch of teenagers. She will listen to Fudge and only Fudge. That point was made crystal clear."

"So we should just do nothing?" Ron asked in shock then leaned closer to Harry and toned down his voice. "None of us have had the training Sirius and Remus gave you. None of us could even try to do what you did yesterday. You made us realize that we're *not* ready for You-Know-Who and whatever else is out there so excuse us for being angry. You were alone yesterday, Harry. You should never have to be alone like that."

"No he shouldn't," James scowled.

"And again I repeat. They may have been more experienced Death Eaters but they were two against hundreds. SOMEONE SHOULD HAVE HELPED!"

Sirius, James and Lily flinched at Remus yell and Sirius tried to pat his friend with a shaky hand, "Shh Moony. Calm down. It's over now."

"Ron has a point, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You were right. I don't know how to handle a Dementor. I probably couldn't hold my own against a Death Eater but I want to learn how. Professor Umbridge has no intention of preparing us for anything other than to mold our minds to believe what the Ministry wants us to believe. OWLs are too important to waste on a power struggle."

They walked the rest of the way to the Great Hall in silence. Harry had no idea that yesterday's attack affected so many so deeply. It felt so strange that all of these people who had called him the Heir of Slytherin a few years ago were now looking up to him, even if they may be taller. In his mind, Harry didn't think he had done anything out of the ordinary. He simply did what he had to in order to survive. Nothing more, nothing less.

"People are so susceptible," Lily scowled. "They change their mind all the time. First Harry is evil because he is a Parselmouth. Then he's back being good. Then he is an attention seeker because of that whole Goblet of Fire spitting his name out and now he's back being a hero. Make up your minds people!"

A/N- Loved all my reviews. Thank you so much.

And of course I own nothing of this.

I don't own any of this.

Chapter 7

Quidditch Tryouts

That night at the Gryffindor Tower had certainly been a tense one. Fred and George were testing their products on first year students, something Hermione didn't approve of. She even went as far as to threaten sending word to Mrs. Weasley, something neither twin could believe.

Sirius and James looked shocked.

"That's bellow the belt," James spluttered.

Mrs. Weasley would certainly send them a Howler at the first possible convenience. Hermione was definitely taking her Prefect position seriously while Ron seemed a little reluctant to get involved in situations that didn't involve him or Harry.

Lily rose an eyebrow and looked pointedly at Remus who ducked his head and mumbled something inaudible.

"Hey, stop that!" Sirius cried shielding Remus.

"Moony may not do much in public but he tells us off in private, okay?" James said angry.

"Sorry," Lily mumbled.

Since Harry had spent the previous night in the hospital wing, this was the first chance everyone in Gryffindor had to talk to Harry freely. It didn't last long because Ron declared that anyone that bothered Harry would be given detention with Snape. That did the trick. Ron wasn't really popular after that but Harry was left alone. Hermione, still furious with Fred and George, retreated to bed early with Ron giving up on his homework a short time later. Despite his own exhaustion, Harry knew that if he put off his homework he would regret it.

"I'm proud of Ron," James said beaming. "Though he could have said Filch. Detention with Snape is just cruel."

He tackled his Potions assignment first, finishing it an hour and a half later. By then there were only a few people in the Common Room. Rubbing his tired eyes, Harry started on his History of Magic assignment determined to finish it. Almost two hours later it was finished. Unable to keep his eyes open any longer, Harry called it a night. He set his alarm to go off early so he could go to the hospital wing and be back before anyone would notice. Harry also cast a few silencing charms around his four poster bed so in the chance he had a nightmare he didn't wake anyone up.

The next morning came too fast for Harry's liking. Pulling himself out of bed, Harry dressed as quietly as possible before leaving his dorm room to hurry to the hospital wing. To say that Madam Pomfrey was displeased about Harry's state was a severe understatement. She recognized his exhaustion immediately and gave him a variety of potions that wouldn't conflict with his prescribed one. By the time Harry left the hospital wing he was feeling better than he had in a long time. The pain from his still healing muscles had decreased and he was certainly more awake now.

Just like the day before, Harry settled at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, waiting for everyone else to wake up. He pulled out his dream journal and wrote down whatever he could remember from his dreams last night. There had been a few strange ones but at least he hadn't seen the graveyard again. It wasn't a nightly occurrence but it was still something Harry feared every night. He hated watching Cedric's murder over and over again. He hated waking up screaming. He hated waking people up with his screaming.

It wasn't long before people started entering for breakfast. Putting away his dream journal Harry pulled out his Charms book and gazing through it. Before Harry knew it someone sat down with a thump to his right followed by someone else sitting down gentler to his left. Harry had to bite back a smile as Hermione started to pour herself a cup of coffee while Ron started piling food on his plate.

"Why didn't you wake me up, Harry?" Ron asked as he covered his mouth to prevent a yawn from escaping. "I would have come with you."

Harry closed his Charms book and looked at Ron with a raised eyebrow. Ron looked like he was about to fall back asleep as it was. "No, you wouldn't have," Harry said honestly. "I've been up for a while. Madam Pomfrey wanted to see me to make sure everything was all right."

"I don't think Ron would have wanted to wake up hours earlier than he had too," Sirius snorted.

"He is speaking from experience," James told Lily who giggled and then giggled harder at Sirius' glare.

Hermione instantly touched Harry's arm. "Is everything all right, Harry?" she asked. "You said that you were tired—"

"—which is to be expected considering that I had been taking naps at home," Harry interrupted calmly. "Everything's fine. Madam Pomfrey just wants to keep an eye on me for

the rest of the week. She wants to be absolutely certain what happened on the train won't postpone my recovery." It was basically the truth. Besides, his right side was feeling a lot better today so why mention it and worry them?

"That's a relief," Ron said then started stuffing food in his mouth.

The Great Hall quickly filled with students and teachers. Looking up at the Head Table, Harry couldn't help but notice the absence of a large friendly man by the name Hagrid. He let out a sigh as he grabbed a piece of toast. It had been almost two weeks since he had heard from Hagrid who was on a mission for Professor Dumbledore. The last thing Harry heard from his Care of Magical Creatures teacher was that 'things were going slower than expected' and Hagrid would see him as soon as possible. All Harry could do was hope Hagrid was all right.

"Don't worry Harry. Hagrid can take care of himself," Lily said confidently.

Double Charms was the first class of the day. Professor Flitwick spent at least the first quarter of an hour stressing the importance of the OWLs followed by the next hour reviewing Summoning Charms since they would be on the exam. At the end of class, Professor Flitwick assigned the largest Charms assignment they ever had. At that moment Harry was certainly glad he had stayed up last night so he could work on today's assignments tonight.

Following Charms the fifth year Gryffindors had double Transfiguration. Once again they listened about the importance of their OWLs (which was already becoming an annoyance). Once the lecture was over, the class started working on Vanishing Spells, difficult magic that was bound to be on the OWL exam. For the remainder of the class everyone tried to vanish the snails they were given. Hermione managed to successfully vanish her snail in three tries and Harry managed after five but they were the only two who were successful. Both Harry and Hermione earned ten points for Gryffindor and weren't given homework. Everyone else had to practice tonight.

"You know, if teachers didn't keep reminding us how OWLs are stressful and difficult many nervous breakdowns could be avoided," Lily said knowingly. "I mean every second of every class they mention the damned OWLs. How are you supposed to keep calm like that?"

After a quick lunch was Care of Magical Creatures. The previous day's rain had left the lawn soaked which made it an interesting experience traveling to Hagrid's cabin by the Forbidden

Forest, where class was held. Everyone tried to avoid the larger puddles but some were not so fortunate and had mud splattered on their clothes, causing several girls to complain (Parvati and Lavender being two of them).

"Girls," Sirius snorted but when Lily glared at him he said quickly, "You aren't Lily. I mean you are but you're not you know? Not like that, all girly. Help here!"

"I think Padfoot that you should just cut your losses short and stop there," Remus said patiently.

Since Hagrid was still away Professor Grubbly-Plank was his substitute. She stood about ten yards from the front door of the cabin with a trestle table covered with twigs in front of her. Once everyone arrived, she called the class to attention. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood at the end of the long table to the teacher's left. "Good afternoon class," Professor Grubbly-Plank said. "Can anyone tell me what these things in front of me are called?"

Hermione raised her hand instantly. Malfoy started to mock her, earning in snickers from his fellow Slytherins. Harry could only roll his eyes in annoyance as he knelt down for a closer look. Upon closer inspection Harry noticed that the twigs weren't twigs at all. They resembled tiny pixies but looked to be made of wood. They had thin arms and legs and at the end of each hand had flat face with small brown eyes. Harry was about to back away when one of them moved and jumped on Harry's left shoulder, causing a few of the students to cry out in surprise.

"Settle down!" Grubbly-Plank said sharply.

Trying to remain calm, Harry held his hand out, palm upwards by his left shoulder and let the creature jump on his hand before he returned it to the table. Glancing up at Professor Grubbly-Plank, Harry noticed that she was looking at him in surprise like she had last year when he had calmed down the unicorn. He really didn't like that look. He only got that look when he did something no normal witch or wizard was supposed to do.

"Stop looking!" James cried.

Professor Grubbly-Plank finally returned her attention to the class and scattered a handful of some sort of brown rice substance amongst the stick-creatures. "Miss Granger," she said at last. "What are these creatures?"

"Bowtruckles," Hermione said instantly. "Tree-guardians that normally live in wand-trees. They eat woodlice and fairy eggs if they can get them."

"Very good," said Professor Grubbly-Plank. "Ten points to Gryffindor. Bowtruckles live in trees whose wood is able to be used for wands. Whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree where a Bowtruckle resides, it is smart to have a gift to distract them, such as woodlice. They don't appear to be dangerous but their fingers are very sharp. Now, gather closer, take some woodlice and a Bowtruckle. There are enough for one between every three students. Study them closely. I expect a sketch of them with all of the body parts labeled at the end of the class."

"I hate when teachers expect sketches," Lily huffed. "What if you can't draw?"

"They don't expect a piece of art Lily," James chuckled, "They are more interested in knowing if you can name the body parts."

"Still!" she moaned.

Harry knelt down again and let the Bowtruckle jump back on his shoulder. Turning to Ron and Hermione, Harry saw that Hermione already had some woodlice in her hand. They walked over to a patch of grass away from everyone else. Hermione pulled out her wand and dried the ground so they could sit down. Harry sat down slowly so not to startle the Bowtruckle.

"Um...Harry, could you maybe get it to lie down on the ground?" Hermione asked.

Harry brought his right hand up to his left shoulder, palm up, and the Bowtruckle stepped on to it. Slowly, Harry lowered his hand and brought the creature in front of his face. It turned around and they looked into each other's eyes for a long moment. Suddenly, Harry felt something he couldn't explain. He felt a sense of peace and protectiveness mixed in with a little fear. The Bowtruckle was afraid of what they would do. Harry smiled at the creature and let his own feelings of curiosity and kindness mix with the sensations he was feeling. Slowly, Harry felt the fear fade away.

"Harry can feel what the Bowtruckle is feeling?" Lily asked. "Do you think Harry is some kind of empath?"

Remus looked pensive but James cried

"I sure hope not!"

"James-" Lily was about to scold.

"You know what the Ministry will do if Harry is one?" he asked desperately, "They'll make him spy for them. They will lock him up and use him like some weapon. No, no, no. Harry is not one."

"He may be," Remus said cautiously.

"No he is not!" James cried.

"Okay, he isn't," Sirius said, "But if he is, do you really think Moony and I will let the Ministry take Harry?"

James looked a little pacified by this but was still mumbling that Harry was not an empath.

"She's a she not an 'it', Hermione," Harry said softly as he slowly lowered the Bowtruckle to the ground, his eyes never leaving the creature. "She's afraid of what we may do to her. I'm trying to reassure her but right now just be patient."

The Bowtruckle stepped off Harry's hand onto the ground. With his left hand, Harry motioned for her to lie down on the ground, hoping that the Bowtruckle would understand. She did and slowly lowered herself so that she was lying down, her eyes never leaving Harry who smiled at her and gave her some woodlice. Ron and Hermione immediately started to draw with Harry following suit. It didn't take them long to finish then to start labeling. As soon as they were done, Harry motioned for the Bowtruckle to stand up then gently put her back on his shoulder where she waited patiently.

"I think that's everything," Hermione said with a smile as she rolled up her completed diagram then looked around at the other groups who were still working on their drawings and talking to each other. "I think we're the first group done."

"Well it helps when you can talk to—er—her," Ron said with a shrug then looked at Harry curiously. "So how'd you do it, Harry?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. This time he was being completely honest. He didn't know how he knew what to do. He just did what felt right. "I can't explain it," he said as he rolled up his diagram. "She was afraid we would hurt her so I tried to reassure her that we wouldn't. It was the same with the unicorn last year. He was afraid of us. They don't understand our curiosity for them since they have none for us."

"Yes, I remember that. Harry helped and he knew what the unicorn was feeling—"

"LILY! Stop that! Our son is not an empath!"

Hermione thought for a moment before nodding. "Actually that makes sense," she said. "I never thought of it that way. These creatures are pulled out of their homes so we can learn about them. Maybe you should tell Professor Grubbly-Plank, Harry. I don't think anyone has ever thought of the creature's point of view. Think of how much help you could be in classes!"

"NO, DON'T DO THAT!" James cried, "She'll tell the Ministry!"

Harry shook his head. "No way," he said firmly. "I saw the look on Grubbly-Plank's face. This sort of thing isn't normal. I don't need any more attention. Come on, class is about to end. We should hand in our assignments."

"Good boy," James said relieved.

Knowing that the conversation was over, Harry slowly stood up and strolled over to Professor Grubbly-Plank with Ron and Hermione following him. They handed in their assignments then returned the Bowtruckle to the table after bidding her farewell then left for the greenhouses where they had Herbology shortly. Just as they reached the greenhouses the bell rang and students started filing out. They knew it was a fourth-year class because Ginny was one of the first ones out.

"Hi!" Ginny said with a smile as soon as she saw Harry, Ron and Hermione. "How's your day so far?"

"Long," Ron answered bitterly. "Everyone's giving us homework."

Harry shook his head and rubbed his eyes under his glasses before looking back at Ginny. "In other words the rumors of the fifth year being stressful are certainly true," he clarified. "See you at dinner?"

Ginny's smile widened. "Of course!" she exclaimed then started to move on with the rest of her classmates. "See you all then! Have fun!"

"What's she all excited about?" Sirius asked bewildered.

"Harry said: See you at dinner," Lily said knowingly. Sirius just stared at her lost. "I think she has a little crush on Harry."

"But he didn't ask her *out to dinner!*" Sirius said lost.

"Still, she got excited," she said smiling.

"Girls are just weird!" Sirius said throwing his arms up.

"I would stop there Padfoot before you have a repeat of what you said a few minutes ago," Remus said wisely.

Ron let out a huff. "Have fun," he muttered. "She's too chipper for her own good."

"And you're too moody," Hermione countered as she led the way into the greenhouse. "Honestly Ron, do you really have to complain about everything. I would expect to hear something from Harry with the way everyone's treating him but you have been irritable all day. Why?"

"Er—nothing," Ron said uncomfortably as he dropped his schoolbag on the ground. "There's just so much homework. We still have yesterday's homework in addition to today's. Do you know how long it's going to take us to do Snape's essay tonight? We also have History, Charms and I have Transfiguration. I'm going to be up all night!"

Harry and Hermione shared a glance but remaining silent as fifth year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs entered the greenhouse. Who would have thought Ron would be so stressed on the second day of school? Hermione was usually the only one vocal about homework although, Harry had no doubt that he probably would be stressing out too if he hadn't finished two of his assignments last night.

"Well fifth year is stressful," Remus pointed out. "But there is definitely something off with Ron."

Once class begun, Professor Sprout addressed the importance of the OWL exams before setting them to work with dragon dung fertilizer, Professor Sprout's favorite. At the end of class they were given another essay to complete before being dismissed, leaving Ron in an even worse mood than he had been in before class if that was possible.

Hungry and aware of the long night ahead of them, Harry, Ron and Hermione grabbed an early dinner (with Ginny joining them just as they started eating) before retreating back to the Gryffindor Tower. Ron and Hermione were shocked to hear that Harry already had two assignments completed and tackled those first while Harry started on his Charms homework. After pulling out some of his own books that he had in his trunk, Harry was able to finish the

assignment just as Ron and Hermione were nearly finished with their Potions essay. Harry then moved on to his Herbology essay, which was nowhere near as difficult as the Charms assignment, and finished it in no time.

Ron had finished two essays and his Charms homework before he claimed that he needed some fresh air. Hermione moved to object but Harry silenced her with a look. Perhaps some fresh air was exactly what Ron needed right now. Ron didn't enjoy schoolwork like Hermione and wasn't healing from injuries like Harry. Deep down Harry knew something else was going on with his best friend but he didn't know how to ask.

"But if he is so stressed about homework putting it off will only make things worse. They will keep piling up," Lily said but the boys just shrugged. She huffed in response.

The next morning transpired the same as the previous. Harry woke up early, was checked over by Madam Pomfrey and ended up sitting in the Great Hall writing in his dream journal before anyone else had arrived. His right side only ached every now and then which pleased Madam Pomfrey immensely. By tomorrow Harry would be pain free and by the end of next week Madam Pomfrey assured Harry he would be able to start flying again with supervision. However, this meant that Harry would be grounded for the tryouts, something he needed to talk to Angelina about. He could only hope that she wouldn't be mad about it.

"She has nothing to be mad about and if she is I'll have a nice chat with her," Sirius said his eyes glinting dangerously.

"I'm sure she won't," Remus said reassuringly patting Sirius.

By the time Ron and Hermione sat down beside him, Harry had the dream that he could remember documented. It was strange. For the third night in a row there had been no dreams of the third task. Those dreams made sense. Seeing Cedric die over and over again, although hard to deal with, was considered normal. His recent dreams with nothing more than colors, distorted voices and a sense of protectiveness with a hint fear. If that wasn't strange enough whenever Harry woke up the feelings remained before slowly fading away.

"That could be explained if Harry was feeling someone else's-" Lily faltered at James' glare.

Hermione slowly poured herself a cup of coffee as Harry put his dream diary away. "No offense, Harry, but how in the world can you be so awake to be doing schoolwork?" she asked

tiredly. "You're getting less sleep than we are but don't look tired in the slightest. No one changes from the way you were two days ago to the way you are now that fast."

Harry shrugged at the comment. "I'm used to getting up early," he said offhandedly. "I guess I just needed a day to recover from what happened on the train. I also haven't had any nightmares since I got here so I'm actually sleeping through the night. Going to bed early last night probably helped too."

"So are you looking forward to tryouts on Friday, Harry?" Ron asked as he piled food on his plate.

"It's hard to say," Harry answered honestly. "It's going to be hard for whoever is chosen to live up to what Oliver accomplished as a Keeper. I had to live up to Charlie's accomplishments when I joined. It's not easy living in someone's shadow. I'm probably more worried about the stress Angelina's going to put on the person than anything."

"Do you have any idea what the tryout is going to be like?" Ron asked curiously.

Harry shook his head. "Whatever Angelina has planned I can't participate," he admitted. Ron and Hermione looked at Harry in confusion. Harry had to admit that the thought of him not participating on anything Quidditch related was as likely as Malfoy being nice. "Oh, I—er—I'm grounded until at least next week. Madam Pomfrey's orders."

"Torturer," James mumbled.

Hermione gave Harry a reassuring smile while Ron seemed to be disappointed. With Divination first thing this morning, Harry and Ron left the Great Hall early for the North Tower. They were among the first few to arrive giving Ron plenty of time to make up a few dreams for his dream journal. Most of Divination class was spent on understanding the hidden meanings of dreams before Professor Trelawney reminded everyone to keep writing in their journals.

Transfiguration passed by slowly with Harry and Hermione being separated from the rest of the class and instructed to be able to cast the Vanishing Spell in just one try while everyone else tried to cast the spell for the first time. By the end of class both Harry and Hermione had managed their task, earning another ten points each for Gryffindor.

Professors McGonagall, Grubbly-Plank and Sinistra gave more homework meaning another long night for all of the fifth year Gryffindors. That night Harry did manage to talk to Angelina

Johnson about the tryouts on Friday. She didn't like Madam Pomfrey's orders but accepted the fact that Harry had no choice in being grounded. Like the previous nights Harry tackled his homework with Ron and Hermione and like the previous night Ron left saying he needed some air after a few assignments were completed.

"He's up to something," Sirius said in a singsong voice.

The remainder of the week seemed to pass in the same manner for Harry. He got up early, was checked over by Madam Pomfrey, went through classes, received homework, completed the homework, and went to bed. Before Harry knew it classes had ended on Friday meaning he had to catch an early dinner before meeting the rest of the team out on the pitch.

When Harry arrived Angelina was already preparing for the tryouts. He helped her finish up as the rest of the team arrived. Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell helped in pulling the brooms out of the closet for students to use. Fred and George ushered in the students trying out for the open position. Harry couldn't keep himself from grinning when he saw Ron enter the pitch. *So this was what he had been up to.*

"Ha! Told you!" Sirius cried.

There were ten trying out for the position. Harry watched from the ground as his teammates tried to score on each Keeper. Ten attempts were made for each Keeper, easily cutting the group down to five and then three. Ron looked extremely nervous but had only allowed three goals to be scored each time. He had the basics down but it appeared that he wasn't completely comfortable on his broom yet. After the second round Harry shot red sparks into the air signaling to his teammates that he wanted to talk to them. Darkness had fallen leaving the nearly full moon as their only source of light in the partially cloudy night.

Remus shivered and James said calmly while Sirius rubbed circles on Remus' back.

"Nearly full Moony. Nearly."

Angelina and Katie were the first to land. "Something wrong, Harry?" Katie asked curiously.

"I have an idea," Harry said as he re-holstered his wand. He knew the Weasleys were purebloods and most likely wouldn't understand what he was thinking but hoped that it would help in deciding who was best for the position. "Tell everyone to land. I want to try something."

Angelina eyed Harry curiously before taking off on her broom and instructing everyone to land. Once everyone was on the ground, Harry nodded his thanks to Angelina before taking over. He signaled for Fred to hand over the Quaffle and without a word threw it as hard as he could at Ron. A few people cried out in shock only to let out a relieved sigh when Ron caught it. Harry motioned for Ron to toss it back and once Harry had it in his hands threw it at the only female finalist, Vicky Frobisher. She caught it but not as firmly as Ron. After she tossed it back, Harry glanced at Angelina and saw that she understood where he was going with this. Without even looking at the finalists, Harry threw the Quaffle at the third finalist, Geoffrey Hopper, who caught it firmly.

"There are many aspects to the role each of you want to play on this team but this is the most important," Harry said to the finalists. "It is your duty to prevent this Quaffle from going through one of the goal posts, no matter how many distractions may be around you." Harry motioned for Geoffrey to toss back the Quaffle, which he did. Harry then threw it between Ron and Vicky. Ron quickly moved and caught it then tossed it back. "It will rarely come right at you," Harry added. "You will need to use every part of your body, including your broom, to prevent this ball from getting past you."

"He is so smart," James puffed proudly, "Just like his dad."

"You had to ruin it," Lily snorted. "Couldn't have stopped at 'smart'?"

Harry handed the Quaffle over to Angelina before approaching the finalists. "Turn around and look up," he said and waited for the three finalists to do so. "That is your domain, your territory, your area of concern. You must protect it at all costs because unless you do our positions won't matter. I trust you all remember the World Cup. Even with Krum catching the Snitch, Bulgaria still lost the game because Ireland scored so much. That is how important a Keeper is to a team."

After a moment of silence Harry turned and walked back to his teammates, leaving the finalists to think about what he said. In all honestly Harry had no idea where any of that came from but he wasn't about to tell anyone that. "They're all yours," Harry said quietly to Angelina who nodded in response before stepping forward.

"Harry is right," Angelina said. "The Keeper is an extremely important position. That is why we're being so thorough. Now, if you'll mount your brooms we will have one more round before making our decision."

Everyone but Harry mounted a broom and took to the air. Harry watched the final round and was amazed at the change in the finalists. Ron only missed one attempt while Vicky and Geoffrey missed two. It was certainly going to be a tough decision. All three of them would need a lot of practice with the team before the first game. Harry was just glad that he wasn't the Captain. He didn't think he could make such a difficult decision.

Everyone landed on the ground. The three finalists waited nervously as Angelina motioned for the team to follow her. They huddled fifteen feet away from the three Keeper hopefuls. Angelina looked tired and nervous as she looked at the team members hopefully. "What do you think?" she asked. "I had talked to Vicky before tryouts and she said that she is in a Charms Club that is her first priority. We need a Keeper who will make the team their first priority."

"Of course!" James cried, "Quidditch comes first!" The others just rolled their eyes.

"Well, Hopper and Frobisher seem a little more stable on their brooms," Katie Bell pointed out quietly. "We can't have someone falling off their broom in the middle of the game. On the other hand, Ron does have his own broom. He doesn't have to use the old school ones that look like one Bludger could finish them off."

"Ron just got his broom," George clarified. "He hasn't had much time to practice on it in the last few days. If you want someone dedicated to Quidditch, Ron's your player. He knows everything about the game."

"I think that was the point Harry was trying to make when he threw the Quaffle at them while standing on the ground," Alicia said. "With practice anyone can manage a broom. The question is who do we feel most comfortable giving the position to?"

Everyone looked at Angelina, awaiting an answer. Fred, George and Harry really couldn't have a say because of Ron so that left the three girls to make the decision. Angelina, Katie and Alicia huddled together and talked quietly for a few minutes. Fred, George and Harry gave them their space and walked over to the finalists who were looking rather nervous. Ron looked at Harry for an explanation of what was going on but only received a discrete shake of the head.

"What's going on?" asked Geoffrey.

"Angelina's getting some final input before she makes her decision," Fred said with a grin. "It shouldn't be too long."

It hadn't taken long before Angelina, Katie and Alicia approached with relieved looks on their faces. They had made a decision and everyone knew it. "First off, I want to thank you three for coming out tonight," Angelina said to the finalists. "You all are talented but we can only choose one of you. The decision is based completely on ability, please understand that. The new Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch Team is Ron Weasley."

"Actually it would have been smarter to choose two," Lily said.

"Lily," James explained slowly. "In Quidditch there is only one keeper."

"I know that," she rolled her eyes. "But why don't you ever have a reserve team?"

"A what?" Sirius asked.

"Muggles have reserves for every position in their sports," Remus explained. "So if a player gets hurt and can't play they can put the reserve on. Lily is actually right, in the Wizarding World if a player gets hurt the team has to forfeit the game."

"Interesting," James eyes were glinting.

"Oh no," Sirius said worried. "James is scheming. Every man for himself!" he finished ducking in the bed and hiding under the covers.

Ron's eyes went wide with shock as he was immediately congratulated by the team members and the other finalists. When the shock finally did wear off, Ron had the biggest smile on his face as Fred and George patted him on the back proudly. Harry couldn't help but smile at the three Weasley brothers. It was amazing that with everything going on and the differences between them the Weasley family could still be as close as ever. Despite the carefree front Fred and George put up for everyone, they were just as protective and as proud of their family as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

That night there was a party in the Gryffindor Common Room but it wasn't long before everyone called it a night. Many were exhausted from the overabundance of homework and wanted nothing other than a good night's rest. It had certainly been a long first week for everyone, especially the fifth and seventh year students. Everyone was looking forward to the weekend although there was no doubt it was going to be anything but relaxing.

A/N- Not much happens in this chapter I know. I am not very happy with it. Next chapter has more things to comment.

Opinions were divided and there was more or less a tie. Since most of the people that wanted me to keep going as I am said that they preferred it this way because they could remember what had happened in the original fic, I decided to compromise. I'll keep the same style as in I'll keep posting the whole chapter but I will skip parts that are repetitive commenting where I think it's important and where I can get new things instead of the same old same old. This way I can please you all and not get repetitive and you can still read the Midnight Series from here.

I don't own any of this.

Thank you all my reviewers. Special thanks to Lori Aguilar who gave me a beautiful review but since it wasn't signed I wasn't able to respond via PM. I always love all of my reviews even if I can't answer all of them.

Chapter 8

Protective Brothers

Like every morning Harry was the first one awake in his dormitory. It didn't matter that it was a Saturday morning because Harry still had to check in with Madam Pomfrey for his prescribed potion. The pain in his right side had all but vanished leaving Harry feeling much stronger than he had at the beginning of the week which seemed ages ago. It was hard for Harry to believe that only a week ago he had been home with Sirius, Remus and Tonks. If this week was any indication of how the term was going to be Harry knew it was going to be a long one.

Pulling himself out of bed, Harry quietly cleaned up and changed into a long-sleeve shirt and jeans before leaving the dorm room and Gryffindor Tower for the hospital wing. The silence of the hallways was deafening but Harry had grown accustomed to it by now. It was always quiet this early in the morning. Most people would probably but uncomfortable with the

amount of silence but Harry found it comforting. He had found that if he closed his eyes he could almost feel a soothing presence that was only there when the halls were empty. He didn't know where it came from and hadn't told anyone about it. For some reason the presence just felt right.

"See, that proves he is not an empath!" James said happy.

"No it doesn't," Lily said concerned for James' sanity.

"Of course it dose. Harry has those same feelings of a soothing presence and comfort and etc. but there is no one around. So there has to be another explanation meaning he is not an empathic!" James explained.

"James," Remus started slowly, "That only means that there is something soothing around, it doesn't exclude--"

"YES IT DOES!" James cried.

"Okay, James, whatever makes you happy," Remus gave up.

Entering the hospital wing, Harry saw that Madam Pomfrey was waiting for him with a smile on her face. There had been a silent agreement between them ever since the start of the summer. Harry wouldn't complain and Madam Pomfrey wouldn't either. After this summer Harry felt it was best to just let Madam Pomfrey do her job and things went much smoother.

The checkup went quickly. Madam Pomfrey declared that the muscles on his injured right side had finally healed and his heart was doing much better. There was still some minor healing but, according to her, nothing that couldn't be healed by the end of the month. This was a great relief for Harry. He couldn't wait for everything to go back to normal and this entire heart condition be a simple memory. It had been held over his head for too long.

Al four of them sighed relieved.

After grabbing an early breakfast, Harry returned to the Gryffindor Tower, snuck into his dorm room and grabbed his mirror Sirius had given him, ink, quill, parchment, and some of his homework before settling in front of the fire in the Common Room. He wrote a quick letter to Tonks since he knew she would send him a howler if he didn't then started working on the essay of self-fertilising shrubs for Professor Sprout to pass the time until he could use the mirror without waking Sirius up.

"Around four in the afternoon then," Remus said with a straight face.

"It's not my fault Moony, that unlike you, I actually appreciate the fine art of sleeping," Sirius glared at Remus.

"I didn't know sleeping had been proclaimed an art," Lily chuckled.

"Padfoot is starting the campaign and has already printed the pamphlets," James said smirking.

Sirius' glare intensified.

Sirius loved sleeping as late as he possibly could making Harry feel guilty when ever he woke the Animagus up.

"You don't need to feel guilty Prongslet. You are not like some people *cough* Moony and Prongs *cough* that like to wake me up at ungodly hours just for fun!" Sirius said firmly glaring at said offenders.

Slowly, students started to rise, strolling down the stairs and out of the Gryffindor Tower only half awake. Hermione wasn't surprised to see Harry up already and sat down to wait for Ron to come down. Bored after only a few minutes of waiting, Hermione grabbed Harry's Astronomy book and started flipping through it, not really paying attention to what she read. Harry glanced at his watch and saw that it wasn't even eight o'clock yet. Sirius wouldn't be up for a few hours, unless Remus forced him out of bed which was nearly impossible for anyone to do.

"See, what did I tell you? Moony is evil! Evil! And Prongs is no better!" Sirius cried and Lily couldn't help but laugh as the other two rolled their eyes.

When Ron finally came down the stairs he looked as tired as everyone else if not more so. It had surprised Harry that Ron had tried out for the team with as overloaded as he already was. For the past week Ron had put his assignments off to the last minute which aggravated Hermione to no end. Ron was also the first one to complain repeatedly about the overabundance of homework. Hermione usually handled the pressure better than anyone so there was no surprise when her assignments were better than anyone else's.

Harry had experienced the overload last year with the Tournament and homework that the teacher's had piled on. He had even gone as far as cutting back on sleep and meals, something that Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore hadn't been pleased to discover. To

prevent anything like that from happening again, Sirius and Remus had instructed Harry to take one task at a time instead of thinking about the sum of tasks. Harry had to admit that line of thinking had probably saved him from feeling how Ron had this week which was an extremely good thing since Harry couldn't afford to have his emotions get the better of him.

When Ron and Hermione leaving for breakfast, Harry found himself alone in the Common Room as he finished his Herbology essay and started working on McGonagall's Inanimatus Conjuris Spell assignment. A Quidditch practice had been scheduled for this afternoon which Harry had to attend regardless of the fact that he was grounded. It was also Ron's first practice with the team and Harry wasn't about to miss that. No matter who you were, the first practice for any rookie was uncomfortable.

Harry was halfway through his Transfiguration homework when Ron and Hermione returned from breakfast and brought down their own homework to start on. After nearly an hour and a half of homework, Harry excused himself and went up to his dorm room with his mirror in hand. Once Harry made sure that the room was empty he called for his godfather and didn't have to wait long before Sirius' face appeared in the mirror.

"Good morning, Proglet!" Sirius said happily. "How was your first week?"

"For Sirius to be that chirpy it has to be closer to good afternoon than morning," Remus said knowingly.

"Once again, I am not to fault if you don't appreciate sleeping. I am sure Lily agrees with me," Sirius said crossing his arms.

"Actually I usually get up early," she said and jumped when Sirius cried:

"TRAITORS! ALL OF YOU! NO SENSE OF WHAT'S GOOD IN LIFE WHATSOEVER!"

"Long," Harry said honestly. "You were right about Umbridge. She definitely—er—has her own way of thinking. I don't think I've ever seen a teacher scold Hermione so much. Everything the Ministry and the author of our text book say is right and everyone else is wrong. How could the Ministry do something like this with what happened on the train?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Trust me when I say I understand your frustration," he said bluntly. "According to our sources the Ministry has been bombarded with Howlers about *Professor* Umbridge. Students are complaining to their parents about her and their parents are complaining to the Ministry. Everyone is using what happened as grounds to demand better

teachers for their children. There aren't many who are happy with the fact that there was only one student capable of defending himself."

"You'd think that a Minister that is so worried in keeping his post would cave to the pressure and sack Umbridge on the spot," Remus said frowning.

"Why? He wants a spy there," James asked.

"Because if Fudge loses popularity the people may demand that he step down," Lily explained, "He must think that the parents of Hogwarts students aren't enough people and the majority will still back him up."

"That's stupid," Sirius snorted. "With the way families cross-married in the wizarding world there isn't one witch or wizard that doesn't have a relative at Hogwarts. Even if it is just a cousin of some sort."

"But everyone else was trapped on the train," Harry protested. He let out a sigh as he rubbed the back of his neck. This was the last thing he wanted. Why couldn't everyone just let what happened go? Why did they have to always use him as an example? "So what happens now?" he asked softly.

"I wish I could tell you," Sirius said. "The Ministry—more so Fudge than anyone—is claiming that Umbridge is the best person who will follow the Ministry guidelines. A load of rubbish if you ask me. Fudge is just afraid of Dumbledore building an army that will stand against the Ministry. Fudge is too addicted to power right now to make any sort of rational decision."

James looked up from the book and his lips were twisting. He looked like he was fighting some internal battle that apparently he lost as he burst in laughter. He wasn't the only one, the other three were in similar state of disbelief.

"Come on! How idiotic can the man be? An army? Of children?" Sirius cried.

Remus stopped laughing and turned serious, "The worst part is that his idiocy is actually hindering the students."

"Idiots in power are always dangerous," Lily nodded grimly.

Harry would ask if someone was controlling Fudge but he knew first hand how incompetent Fudge really was. The Minister had been so desperate to cover a mistake the Ministry had made that he was willing to give an innocent man the Dementor's kiss. Just thinking how close Harry had come to losing his godfather made him shudder. No one like Fudge should be the Minister of Magic.

"Is something bothering you, Pronglet?" Sirius asked, his concerned voice breaking into Harry's thoughts. **"You're awful quite today. Has something else happened that Dumbledore's neglected to tell us? Did you have an outburst? Is Snape being a git?"**

"When isn't he?" James grumbled.

Did Umbridge say something to you?"

Rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses, Harry pushed his thoughts out of his head. He really didn't want to worry Sirius with thoughts of what might have been. "I just have a lot on my mind," Harry said with a shrug. "Remus was right. Fifth year is tough. I don't think I've ever had so much homework in the first week before. I haven't had any outbursts, Snape's being Snape and Umbridge was a little miffed when I didn't react to her taunting. She blames you and your problems with Fudge for my knowledge of 'dangerous spells'."

Sirius grinned at the comment. "Well at least she understands talent," he said then looked over his shoulder.

Lily slapped her own forehead and moaned, "He'll never change."

"Nope," Sirius said happily.

"I'm talking to Harry, Moony! I'll take care of it later!" Sirius returned his attention to Harry. **"Sorry about that. Moony's being Moony."**

"What is that supposed to mean?" Remus said slowly narrowing his eyes.

"That probably you are demanding I do my homework or something just as horrible. You're very mean Moony!"

James nodded.

"You're an adult Sirius," Lily rolled her eyes. "You don't have homework anymore."

"Don't underestimate Moony's powers Lily," James said somberly. "I bet he sets up homework for Sirius just so he doesn't forget what it's like."

Remus just shook his head and rolled his eyes.

So how are you feeling? You certainly look better than when we last saw you."

"I'm fine, Sirius," Harry insisted. "I should be back to normal by the end of the month. I'm grounded through next week but no restrictions other than that." Thinking of Quidditch reminded Harry of last night's events. "Oh! Ron's the new Keeper! We had tryouts yesterday. Angelina's captain now. I think she's going to be just as bad as Oliver."

Sirius looked over his shoulder again. "Hey Moony," he said innocently. "Can I help you with something?"

"Whenever Sirius says something *innocently* you have to worry," Lily snorted. Sirius beamed.

"Give me the mirror, Padfoot," Remus' voice ordered. "It's my turn to talk to Harry." Before Sirius could say anything the image in Harry's mirror shifted from Sirius to Remus.

"Hey! Moony stole the mirror from me! Aren't you going to do something? Didn't you see that? He just went and grabbed it!" Sirius cried but the others ignored him.

"Good morning, cub," Remus said as he eyed Harry for a moment then sighed. "You haven't been staying up all night studying, have you or is it nightmares?"

"I'm fine, Moony," Harry insisted. Why did his guardians always have to assume the worst? Probably because the worst is usually what happens. "I haven't had any nightmares and I haven't been staying up all night. It's just been a long week. I'm still trying to get used to everything. If anything happens, I'll let you know. I promise."

Remus stared at Harry for a moment before nodded. "We going to keep you to that promise, cub," he said with a smile. "I'm sure Padfoot will fill me in on everything you told him so we won't keep you. I trust that Umbridge and Fudge aren't causing you any problems about wanting your statement?"

Harry shook his head. "No one's said anything," he said. "So what are they doing about the investigation? I thought they needed to talk to me because I was a witness. They aren't going to blame me for Cedric's death, are they?"

"They better not," James growled.

"No, not at all," Remus said instantly. "We wouldn't let that happen and neither would the Diggorys. I think Fudge is trying to find other sources of information so he can prove that Voldemort hasn't returned. You are a last resort because he knows what you are going to say. He knows that his career will be over the moment it's revealed your memories were seen to confirm Dumbledore's statement."

"So, why don't we just let people in the Ministry see it?" Harry asked. "Wouldn't it stop a lot of the problems with Fudge?"

Remus looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "And let everyone know about your outbursts?" he asked. "Harry, we have to put up with Fudge right now to protect you. If the Ministry were to see what happened they could claim that you are too dangerous to attend Hogwarts then put you into Ministry custody to study these outbursts. Right now this is the only option we have. We'll just have to do what we can to keep Fudge in line."

"And with Fudge just waiting to have something over Harry he would jump at the opportunity," Lily huffed.

Harry's gaze fell as everything that Remus said hit him. So he was the reason everyone had to put up with Umbridge? Dumbledore was being publicly ridiculed to protect him? Why? Why endure so much for one person? Was he really worth it? Was any one person worth risking the safety of so many others? "Maybe you should just let them take me," Harry muttered at last.

"Not in a million years," Remus said firmly. "Harry, please understand that none of this is your fault. We *will* find a way to make the Ministry believe the truth. We just have to be careful for now. Don't worry about this. Focus on your studies and Quidditch. Try to have a normal school year for once."

"Well done Moony. I see your list is paying off," Sirius beamed.

Harry couldn't help but snort at the comment. It surely didn't start out normal and so far was turning out just like his first year when everyone couldn't stop whispering and getting looks at the-boy-who-lived. "I'll try," Harry said with a soft smile. "I should get going. I have to send a letter to Tonks and finish my homework. I'll let you know if anything comes up here."

"And we'll do the same," Remus said smiling. "Take care of yourself, cub."

Sirius grabbed the mirror from Remus.

"Hey! Padfoot stole the mirror from me! Aren't you going to do something? Didn't you see that? He just went and grabbed it!" Remus cried and Sirius raised an eyebrow:

"At least say something original Moony!"

"Be sure to let us know if Snape's being a git," he said. "I have quite a few pranks in mind for him. I'm just waiting for a reason to do so. Don't push yourself too hard, Pronglet. Your health comes first."

Harry bid goodbye then put the mirror in his trunk. He couldn't help feeling overwhelmed by everything he had heard. People were actually complaining about Umbridge but nothing could be done without revealing Harry wasn't magically stable right now. Just another instance the Order was so close yet so far from achieving their objective. Why did everything always have to be so complicated?

After sending Hedwig off with his letter for Tonks, Harry, Ron and Hermione had an early lunch before Ron and Harry left for Quidditch practice. Ron had been fairly quiet all morning except for grumbling about schoolwork and the fact that Harry wouldn't be able to participate in practice today. With as fidgety as Ron had been it was easy to see that he was nervous about his first practice with the team just like he had been nervous about tryouts. Anything Hermione said concerning schoolwork, Ron ignored her and looked at his watch which aggravated Hermione to no end.

Entering the pitch, Harry and Ron walked into the changing room and saw that the rest of the team besides Angelina was present. The team greeted Ron and teased Harry about getting out of the grueling practices Angelina was bound to put them through. Ron was wearing Oliver Wood's old robes which fit him well and saved the team from needing to order another set of robes.

Harry watched practice from the stands. It started off with training Ron in a similar fashion to how the tryouts were. The team continuously tried to score on an extremely nervous Ron.

Watching his best friend, Harry couldn't help but think of how different he was from his best friend. Ron wanted attention and did what he could to receive some acknowledgment while Harry did what he could to stay in the shadows. It made Harry wonder what Ron would be like if he had been the-boy-who-lived.

"You can't compare. If Ron had been the boy-who-lived would he still have six older brothers and a sister or are you saying he would have your life? Would he had been showered with attention from an early age or would he have been raised by abusive relatives?" Lily asked.

James looked at her weirdly.

"What she is saying is that all depends with the circumstances in which he was raised. Ron has always had to compete with a bunch of siblings for attention and has never stood out. That's why he wants to stand out so much. Maybe if he had been the boy-who-lived and still had had his family but had been the one to stand out from the beginning he wouldn't crave it so much for instance. Or maybe he would just be a stuck up little prat. The point is, you can't compare this Ron with a Ron that had a different life. Yes, character is important and matters a lot, but experiences matter too. They mold us," Remus explained.

Halfway through practice a group of Slytherins entered the stadium with Malfoy leading them. Harry instinctively grabbed his right wrist and felt his wand holster. He couldn't be the instigator but he was prepared to defend himself if he had to. Keeping his gaze at his teammates, Harry watched the Slytherins approaching out of the corner of his eye. He had to bite back a groan in frustration. Why did Malfoy always have to cause trouble?

"Because he is Malfoy," James offered.

"Well, well," drawled Malfoy. "What's the matter, Potter? Too good to practice now? Or maybe your expensive broom won't support the weight your big head anymore." His eyes narrowed when Harry didn't look at him. Malfoy took a step closer and pulled out his wand. "Or maybe your morning visits to the hospital wing have something to do with it."

"And I bet he told his daddy," Remus grimaced.

"Hope not," James joined the grimace. "But unfortunately hope here is not that high."

Harry bit his lower lip as he desperately tried to keep his anger under control. He couldn't lose control, not again. Despite what Sirius and Remus had told him, Harry knew the only thing he could do now was bury his emotions. He didn't know how Malfoy found out about his

morning checkups but it didn't matter because there was no way Malfoy could know what they were about. Malfoy didn't know anything. He was simply grasping at straws to force a confrontation. Harry was determined not to take the bait.

The only benefit of Malfoy taunting Harry was that he wasn't taunting the team in the air. It would make Ron more nervous than he already was. All of a sudden Harry felt something poking into his back as Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry's face. Determined not to panic, Harry finally shifted his gaze to Malfoy with passive look on his face. Unfortunately this only infuriated Malfoy more.

"It makes me sick how everyone fawns over you, Potter," Malfoy spat. "Everyone fails to realize that if it wasn't for you we wouldn't have been in danger to begin with." Harry inhaled sharply at the comment making Malfoy smirk. "Unless that was what you wanted. You love being the hero, don't you, Potter? You love everyone following you like the little lost dogs they are."

"Okay, I know he is a kid and you can't pummel him but I want at least some serious pranking on that git!" James demanded.

"Don't worry Prongs. Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Moony will not disappoint you," Sirius said solemnly.

Harry was grabbed under the arms by Crabbe and Goyle, pulled to his feet then pulled out of the stands, the Slytherins surrounding him. Someone's wand was still digging into his back. Malfoy led them to the nearest changing room then moved out of the way as Crabbe and Goyle threw Harry to the floor. Rolling over and sitting up, Harry saw the wands of Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, and Malfoy pointing at him. He scrambled to his feet and with a flick of the wrist had his wand in hand. He didn't want to but he was ready to defend himself if necessary.

"And then you'll all be in trouble," Sirius said glaring at the book.

"Harry may be able to defend himself but it's still pretty cowardly," Lily huffed. "Five against one."

"Ooooo!" Parkinson mocked. "I'm scared. It's five against one, Potter."

Malfoy glanced at Parkinson before returning his attention to Harry. "Unless Potter believes he can take us all at once," he sneered as he took a step closer. "It wouldn't surprise me. The

Potters have a history of biting off more than they can chew or is that the influence of your pathetic guardians? How are your full moons, Potter?"

"Quite fine thank you very much for your concern," Remus drawled.

Crabbe howled like a wolf while everyone else snickered.

"I bet he didn't. I bet he doesn't even know how a howl sounds like," Sirius said annoyed.

Harry glared at Malfoy as he tightened his grip on his wand. That was an extremely low blow. Malfoy always seemed to enjoy bashing Remus because of his being a werewolf and Sirius for turning against the Black family in joining Dumbledore's side in the last war. It also didn't help that Malfoy was related to Sirius through his mother. That was why he took Sirius' choice of sides so personally.

"Harry! Don't fall for it. He hasn't said anything much yet. So what if he acknowledges the fact that I am a werewolf and Sirius is smarter than the rest of his family. It's true anyway. He's just goading you. If you start getting angry even before he starts with the derogatory comments you won't have a chance. Stay cool. They hate it."

"What's going on here?" Fred shouted. The five Slytherins quickly turned around to see the Gryffindor Quidditch Team standing in the doorway with their wands in their hands. They all looked outraged. "It looks like this lot wanted to prove how cowardly they really are."

"You forget something extremely important, you little ferret," George said angrily, "you mess with one of us; you mess with all of us." His eyes narrowed as he raised his wand and pointed it at Malfoy. "You mess with our brother and you're in for a world of hurt. Get out before you are hit with so many curses that you won't be walking for a week."

Cheers were heard from the group.

"Well done George!" Lily beamed.

Harry took that opportunity to point his wand at Malfoy's back. "How does it feel to be surrounded and outnumbered, Malfoy?" he asked evenly. The relief he was feeling from his teammates arriving was overriding the majority of his anger towards Malfoy right now. "Just remember this feeling, the helplessness and the fear the next time you decide to corner someone to demonstrate how much of a bully you are."

The Quidditch Team moved out of the way and waited as the five Slytherins hurried out. Everyone let out a sigh of relief, having avoided a fairly messy confrontation. Lowering his wand, Harry let out a breath he didn't even realize he had been holding. He knew he should have expected something like this happening. Malfoy had always been the first to act on jealousy. It was usually limited to taunts except for last year when Malfoy physically attacked Harry late one night. *As if I don't have enough to worry about.*

Angelina called an end to practice, still a little shaken up by everything. Fred, George and Ron quickly changed robes then walked back to the castle with Harry, determined to serve as bodyguards in case Malfoy was stupid enough to try anything. They walked to the Gryffindor Tower in silence, only the password: 'mimulus mimbletonia' being spoken to the Fat Lady portrait. The moment they entered the Common Room all four of them collapsed in chairs in front of the fire.

"So, how did practice go?" Hermione asked as she approached.

A glance was shared between the teammates before Harry turned to Hermione with a soft smile on his face. "Just fine," he lied. Harry didn't know why he was lying about this, especially to Hermione. It was most likely because he just wanted to forget the entire confrontation ever happened. Thinking about it made him angry which was the last thing Harry wanted to feel. "A few more practices like today and Ron will be ready in no time."

"Like you saw much of the practice," Ron muttered but everyone heard him. He ignored Harry and looked directly at his brothers for a moment before finally looking at his best friend. "I'm going to talk to Angelina and tell her you shouldn't come to practice until you can fly, Harry. We can't chance—"

"—I doubt there will be any more problems, Ron," Harry interrupted calmly.

"You can't just ignore this, Harry!" Fred exclaimed as he jumped to his feet. "What would have happened if we hadn't noticed you missing when we did? It's too risky. I agree with Ron. You just recovered from what happened on the train. We can't take the chance of something like this happening again."

"I personally think Harry won't like being babied," Lily said knowingly.

"What's going on?" Hermione interrupted in confusion.

"Malfoy and his goons decided to pay us a visit at the pitch," George answered. "Being the genius Malfoy is he tried to attack Harry in the changing room. We managed to interfere before anything happened but the problem is Malfoy was able to get to Harry. Five people against one isn't something any of the teachers here would approve of."

Hermione gasped then looked directly at Harry. She was interrupted from saying anything by the portrait entrance opening for the remaining members of the Quidditch team. Katie, Angelina and Alicia sat down in front of the fire, each of them looking exhausted. Silence hung for a long moment as everyone searched for something to say. Harry knew his teammates were upset and felt guilty for being the cause of it.

"I think we should approach McGonagall as a team," Angelina said at last. "Malfoy is out of control." She looked directly at Harry. "Something has to be done, Harry. If the Slytherins are like this now then I'd hate to see what they are like when we play them. This isn't just a simple rivalry between houses anymore. This was an intentional act to cause you harm."

"Yes, but you all seem to be forgetting something," Remus said.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"Umbridge," the other three answered together.

"Malfoy Sr. has Fudge in his pocket," James said bitterly. "I bet Umbridge will interfere and probably spin it as Harry having attacked the Slytherins. It's their word against the Slytherins. If they had been caught by a teacher it is one thing but going there and complaining is another completely different."

"But it's just our word against theirs," Harry pointed out. "Snape isn't going to accept his Slytherins to be punished when nothing really happened. Professor McGonagall knows this. The only thing she'll do is ban me from the pitch until Madam Pomfrey deems me ready to fly. I can't do that. I'm a part of this team and I will not hide from Draco Malfoy." Harry stood up and looked at each member of the team before his gaze rested on Fred and George Weasley since he knew that they would be the hardest to convince. "I am not some little boy that needs to be sheltered and protected from everything. *Nothing* happened. Malfoy is jealous of me. I understand that. Tattling on him will only make things worse."

Not wanting to continue the discussion, Harry retreated to his dorm room where he fell onto his bed and buried his face into his pillow. After everything that's happened how could people believe that he was helpless against someone like Malfoy? He didn't miss it when George had

called him a brother. The Weasley twins had been protective for a while so Harry couldn't say he was surprised. They were treating him like a younger brother who needed protection. The problem was Harry already had overprotective guardians and teachers who believed that he was still the same kid who arrived back in June, fighting for his life. He didn't need siblings treating him the same way.

"Told you so," Lily snorted.

Surprisingly nothing about the encounter with Malfoy was said to Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore. The team and Hermione seemed to agree that bringing the matter public would only make things worse. That didn't stop the team (minus Harry) from going to Madam Hooch and requesting that she supervise their practices for a professional opinion on training a new Keeper. Madam Hooch was touched by the compliment and agreed giving the Gryffindor team a way to ensure that Malfoy didn't try something else during practice.

The rest of the weekend was rather boring. Completing the remainder of his homework and writing in his dream journal was all Harry had planned. There was no way to describe the relief Harry felt when he finally finished his homework. It was all Harry needed to know not to let his homework from the week pile up like Ron had since Ron was close to pulling his hair out in frustration. Hermione and Harry helped as much as they could but when Ron got into his moods Harry and Hermione realized it was best to keep their distance.

Sunday evening had arrived and Ron was still trying to finish his assignments. Harry and Hermione were sitting by the fire relaxing when a tapping noise interrupted the silence. Hermione was the first to notice Hermes, Percy's screech owl, standing on the windowsill looking at Ron. She hurried over to the window and opened it, allowing the owl to fly in and land on the table in front of Ron. Harry and Hermione approached the table slowly, not knowing why on earth Percy would send Ron a letter since Percy was supposed to be not speaking to his family.

As soon as Ron removed the letter attached to the owl's leg, it flew out the same way it entered, leaving the room back to its silence. "Shall we see what good ol' Percy has to say?" Ron asked sarcastically as he unrolled the scroll and started to read. Whatever it was it certainly wasn't good news judging from the anger that was appearing on Ron's face. Once Ron was finished he slammed the letter down on the table. "I can't believe this!"

"What did he say?" Hermione asked softly.

Ron handed over the letter for Harry and Hermione to read.

Hello Ron,

Congratulations on becoming a Prefect! Words can not begin to express my joy to learn you are not following in Fred and George's footsteps.

"I know," Sirius said sadly. "It was a blow, but we are recovering," he finished with a long suffering sigh that was echoed by James.

It is my hope that you will make me proud of the responsibility that has been given to you. Now is the time to start making decisions on your future. Regardless of what others may say, you need to understand that you are in charge of your choices for the future. Don't let someone who is misguided get in your way. I know you are capable of great things, Ron; you just need to have confidence in yourself.

I know you may still be upset with my choices but you can't deny the Ministry doesn't have justification to ask questions. Harry Potter has always been a loose cannon, along with Dumbledore. Measures are finally being taken to ensure that the free reign Dumbledore has had doesn't last. Read the 'Daily Prophet' tomorrow and you'll understand. Remember to keep yourself and your true friends out of trouble.

"WHAT?" James and Sirius cried together.

"The git-" James started but was promptly cut by an annoyed Lily:

"Is playing a part and giving them information."

Your brother,

Percy

"I can't believe he would say such a thing!" Ron ranted as he stood up and started pacing.

"How could he even think it?"

Harry handed back the letter and let out a sigh. He had to admit that if he didn't know Percy was working undercover he would be hurt by what was written. The catch was that Percy was working undercover and from what Mad-Eye Moody had said the mail was currently being

watched. Everyone needed to be careful with what they put into writing, especially when it came to members of the Order and their children.

Lily raised an eyebrow at James who still looked furious.

"Well, he's warning us about something that will be in the 'Daily Prophet' tomorrow," Hermione offered. "He's also warning us to stay out of trouble. Do you think he knows how much of a pain Umbridge is?"

"I wouldn't doubt it," Harry said as he moved in front of Ron, blocking his path. "Ron, remember Percy has a role to play," he said quietly. "He's warning all of us without making it look like it. He has to say something about me because the entire Ministry is. Don't take it personally. I'm not."

"See," Lily said forcibly.

"Okay," James mumbled. "Maybe."

Ron inhaled sharply as he glared at Harry, his anger only increasing. "YOU KNOW WHAT!" he shouted. "I AM SICK AND TIRED OF THIS NEW ATTITUDE YOU HAVE! WOULD IT KILL YOU JUST TO GET ANGRY LIKE THE REST OF US ONCE IN A WHILE OR ARE YOU TOO GOOD FOR THAT?"

"RON!" Hermione scolded.

"I hate to agree with someone that is yelling at Harry, but it is unnerving," Sirius nodded.

Ron didn't wait for an answer and stormed up the stairs to his dorm room. Harry let out a sigh and turned to Hermione who was looking at him sympathetically. Is that what everyone thought? Is that what his best friends thought? Did they believe that he thought he was better than them just because he kept his emotions inside? *They don't know I have no choice. They can never know.*

"If you told them then they might understand," Remus said wisely. "Otherwise you can't really blame them for getting annoyed. Sirius is right. It is unnerving."

"Harry—I—don't listen to him," Hermione stuttered as she walked to Harry and rested a gentle hand on his arm. "Yes, you keep a lot to yourself but it's not your fault. We know you've been through a lot. Give Ron some time to cool off before you talk to him. He's still upset about what Malfoy did but you do have a point about Percy. He has to write things if he's going to fool the Ministry."

Harry nodded but didn't say anything. He knew that this was the price he had to pay for keeping secrets from his friends but it had to be done. He had spent too many years already as a freak. He needed to hold on to any shred of normalcy that he possibly could for as long as he could. With everything that was happening, it was what Harry needed to stay sane right now.

With nothing else to do, Harry retreated to bed a short time later. Ron's hangings were pulled shut so Harry quietly changed, cast a few silencing charms around his four poster bed, and crawled in, making certain his own hangings were closed. He didn't know how long he tossed and turned before finally falling asleep. Of course, the dull ache that came from his scar didn't help matters either.

Darkness was replaced by dim lighting as he opened his eyes. His back was sore and his limbs were stiff. Slowly, he sat up and looked around to find himself alone in a scarcely furnished room. There was only a bed, bed side table and a cupboard. He pulled himself out of bed as the door slowly creaked open. Standing tall, he watched as a short black cloaked figure entered the room.

"Wormtail," he hissed in his high pitched voice making the cloaked figure jump in surprise. "Tell me everything, now!"

"Great, now he's back having visions and stupid Voldemort is up and about. Just bloody great!" James grunted.

"M—Master, y—you're awake!" Pettigrew stuttered as he remained by the door, too afraid to come any closer.

"No Peter, he is sleepwalking," Sirius said annoyed. "Now we have to read about Peter being a traitor and groveling on Voldemort's feet. I hate it."

"W—well, it is September now. Y—you've b—been in a coma for n—nearly two and a half months. W—we don't know what P—Potter did so w—we didn't know how to h—heal you."

"I am surrounded by idiots," he spat, his anger growing.

"Figuring that one only now," Lily snorted.

"None of you could counter something a mere *child* managed to do to me?"

Pettigrew dropped to his knees. "F—forgive me, Master!" he pleaded. "W—we were lost w—without your guidance. P—Potter escaped that n—night and told the m—muggle loving fool e—everything. T—the rumor is that P—Potter almost died that n—night and is s—still recovering. The M—Minister doesn't believe D—Dumbledore. He d—doesn't believe you're b—back, my lord."

A smile appeared on his distorted face. "So, that imbecile of a Minister is acting exactly how we need him to and Potter is weak," he said with pleasure. This was better than he could hope for. "What proof do you have on Potter's condition?"

"I hate a happy Voldemort," Remus said bitterly.

Pettigrew fidgeted nervously. "W—well, two amateurs were r—restless and a—attacked the train t—taking the students to H—Hogwarts," he stuttered. "T—they c—cornered P—Potter and t—tried to f—find out what h—he did t—to you. P—Potter was i—injured in the e—encounter."

A growl escaped his lips. This was certainly not what he wanted. "Fools!" he sneered. "Where's my wand? I shall deal with them myself!"

"T—the fools a—are d—dead, my lord," Pettigrew said nervously. "W—w f—felt best to d—dispose of t—them t—to p—protect you."

A hiss escaped his lists. "Give me your arm, Wormtail," he ordered. "It is time that my servants pay the price for their incompetence. Potter will pay for what he has done to me. Whatever this power that Potter has and that muggle loving fool fears, I want it. No one will be more powerful than me...no one, especially not Harry Potter."

Pettigrew crawled to his master's feet and held out his left arm that was shaking slightly to reveal the dark mark. He quickly grabbed Pettigrew's arm and stood there as Pettigrew started to scream in pain. Another voice joined Pettigrew's as the scene faded away and

Harry Potter awoke in his bed gasping for breath and holding his scar that was screaming in pain.

Harry didn't even realize that he was shaking as he grabbed his glasses and ran out of his dorm room. He didn't care it was the middle of the night as he ran down the stairs, through the Common Room and out of the portrait entrance that opened the moment he reached it. His body was on autopilot as he ran through the hallways and down the staircases until he reached the gargoyle statue and skidded to a halt. He needed to see Dumbledore but how was he supposed to get in if he didn't know the password?

"...my...child...lemon...drops..."

"Who said that?" Sirius asked the others shrugged.

Harry instantly turned around to face the owner of the strange echoing voice only to find nothing. His sense of urgency squelching his curiosity, Harry turned back to the statue and whispered, 'lemon drops'. The gargoyle sprang to life and moved out of the way. The wall split to reveal a stone staircase that was moving upward in a spiral motion. Harry hurried up the staircase until he reached a polished wood door with a griffin brass knocker on it. Hoping against hope that Professor Dumbledore would hear him, Harry rapped the knocker three times and waited, his patience wearing thin.

He didn't have to wait long for the door to open slowly to reveal Dumbledore's office that was dimly lit by only a few candles. Cautiously, Harry entered and glanced around for the Headmaster. The portraits of the former Headmasters and Headmistresses were all asleep. The door closed behind him allowing Harry to see Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, sleeping on his perch. No one seemed to pay any attention to him. No one seemed to even realize he was there but if that was the case then who let him in?

Reaching Dumbledore's desk, Harry rubbed his still burning scar as he debated whether he should just take a seat and wait or try to find Dumbledore. Before Harry could reach a decision an overwhelming wave of power shot through his entire body, forcing him to fall to all fours. He hadn't felt one this powerful since the third task and instantly started to panic. What was he supposed to do?

"Is he having an outburst?" Sirius asked worried.

"Seems like," Lily bit her lips.

His body started to shake uncontrollably as the room started to brighten. It quickly became too bright forcing Harry to close his eyes. His chest was starting to burn alerting Harry that he wasn't breathing. He tried to take in a breath but his lungs wouldn't work. His body was screaming for air as he collapsed to the ground. Slowly the outburst vanished but Harry was too exhausted to move. He felt something soft against his face and partially opened his eyes to see Fawkes looking at him curiously. Harry could only groan as his eyes closed again. He felt Fawkes' feathers against his face and the phoenix's head resting on his shoulder. The bird was staying by his side, protecting him.

The next thing Harry knew a hand was gently touching his face as another was rubbing his back. A muffled, worried voice filled his ears forcing Harry to open his eyes if only partially. Releasing a groan, Harry found himself being rolled over onto his back and gently pulled up into someone's arms. His head tilted to the left and rested against something firm. Harry wanted nothing more than to go to sleep but the clearing voice wouldn't let him.

"Harry, you need to tell me what happened," Professor Dumbledore said gently. "I promise you can sleep then."

Harry let out a groan as he tilted his head back and looked at Dumbledore's worried face. "Scar," he said tiredly. "He's awake...calling them...I...couldn't find you...out burst...bad...one couldn't...breathe..."

Dumbledore's arms tightened around Harry as he let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, my boy," he said softly. "I should have known you would try to find me. Does your scar still hurt, Harry? Are you in any pain whatsoever?"

Blinking slowly, Harry met Dumbledore's gaze as he processed what Dumbledore was asking. Did his scar hurt? Was he in pain? "No," Harry said at last as he fought to keep his eyes open. "Just tired. Scar...doesn't hurt...now."

"Then let him sleep!" James cried angry. "Stop asking questions."

Professor Dumbledore smiled softly and nodded as he repositioned his hold on the teenager. "Very well," he said; relief clearly present in his voice. "Go to sleep, Harry. We can talk more about this in the morning."

Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall forward and against Dumbledore's chest. Right now, he was simply too tired to care about anything other than sleep. He had done what he

set out to do. Professor Dumbledore could do whatever he needed with the information. The important thing was that someone knew that Voldemort was finally awake.

A/N- I've been bad and now I'm behind. It will take a while until next chapter. I blame it on the voices inside my head. I have this voice called Severus, and this one called Harry, and they kept babbling. Then they were joined by other voices called, Remus, Tonks, George, Hermione, Molly and Ron, and they wouldn't shut up until I started typing and the rough sketch of a new story came out. It's a short one that I'll post only after I'm finished. I haven't decided yet if it's going to be a very long one shot or just three or four short chapters long. Anyway it will be coming all at once, and hopefully then you'll forgive me.

Don't own any of this.

Chapter 9

Ministry Interference

"And that is new because?" Lily snorted.

"Maybe it's some new way they managed to interfere. Like having their spy at Hogwarts isn't enough," Sirius growled.

James nodded and looked at Sirius strangely.

"Padfoot, what are you doing?"

Sirius was crumbling pieces of parchment and putting them together in what looked to be a little doll.

"A little Umbridge Voodoo doll," Sirius answered happily.

"And by any chance do you know the rituals?" Remus asked raising an eyebrow.

"There are rituals? It's not just sticking pins on the doll?" Sirius cried waving the little parchment doll around.

"Of course it's not you dolt!" Lily chuckled and Sirius threw the doll in the paper bin scowling.

Distant voices slowly pulled Harry out of his dreamless sleep. He was warm and content where he was in a soft bed that he had slept in a few times before. Opening his eyes, Harry immediately recognized the duvet and knew that he was in Professor Dumbledore's guest quarters. He was lying on his right side, facing the dark wall with the voices behind him. Reflexively, Harry rolled onto his back and turned his head towards the voices that seemed to stop the moment he moved. He blinked a few times and saw two blurry figures, one that was slowly approaching. After a moment he recognized the overabundance of white as Professor Dumbledore but couldn't make out who the other person was that remained in the doorway.

"Good morning, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "You just missed Madam Pomfrey. You should be happy to hear that everything is still healing nicely. There are no signs that last night caused any further damage. Madam Pomfrey also left your potion behind so you won't need to visit the hospital wing today. I would also like to thank you for what you did last night, Harry. You pushed aside your own ailments in order to warn me, something that not many would do."

Harry stared at Dumbledore for a moment before rubbing the tiredness out of his eyes. "I just thought you should know, sir," he said as he sat up. "Voldemort was really angry when he found out about the attack on the train. He knows I'm responsible for his coma and he wants to find out how I did it because..." Harry's gaze fell as he remembered what Voldemort said. It had been the second time Voldemort had mentioned Dumbledore being afraid of Harry. Was it true? Was Dumbledore afraid of these outbursts?

"Of course he is!" Lily and Remus cried together.

"What?" Lily asked defensively as the black-haired marauders scowled at her. "He is. The outbursts hurt Harry. They are all afraid of *that* not of Harry."

"Oh, yeah," James shrugged.

"Because?" Professor Dumbledore prodded gently.

Harry returned his gaze to the somewhat blurry figure of Dumbledore with a worried look on his face. "Because you're afraid of it," he admitted in a quiet, fearful voice. "He said the same thing at the graveyard when he found out about the necklace you made me wear. You're not afraid of me, are you, Professor?"

Dumbledore gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Of course not, Harry," he said pleasantly. "Voldemort doesn't realize these are *outbursts* of magic, not a steady flow. If it were a steady flow then I may be a little unsettled. No one would be able to handle so much magic constantly. Remember what happened to your body after you returned from the graveyard. Your body could not handle the strain; no mortal body would be able to handle it, Voldemort included."

Lily raised her eyebrow.

"Okay, fine, you're right," Sirius grunted. "No need to rub it in."

Harry shuddered at the memory of the three powerful outbursts that had nearly killed him that night. It had felt like he was going to explode.

"But that is not the only reason, Harry," Professor Dumbledore added in the same gentle voice. "I'm not afraid of you because I know you. I know you would never hurt anyone unless you had no other choice. You have a conscience, Harry, and a heart that pushes you to succeed when others fail. I could never be afraid of someone as caring as you, remember that."

Harry couldn't help but feel relieved. Professor Dumbledore wasn't afraid of him. Voldemort was wrong about that but that didn't mean the outbursts themselves weren't dangerous. This simply knowledge fueled Harry's determination to learn how to control them. This had been the first powerful outburst in a long time and it had taken him by surprise, something Harry wasn't going to let happen again.

"I spoke with Remus and Sirius, Harry," Dumbledore said after a moment of silence. "They are worried that the more powerful outbursts are returning too soon for you but want to leave the decision of giving you another suppression necklace up to you. I realize that this is only delaying a matter that needs to be dealt with but we fear this is just another thing you would have to worry about."

Harry looked at Dumbledore nervously. He really didn't know what to do. He wanted to learn how to deal with it but Professor Dumbledore had a point. He did have a lot to worry about already. "What would you do, sir?" he asked softly.

"Well, I would probably take the necklace just to be safe," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly then leaned closer to Harry and smiled. "Just because I have it does not mean I

have to use it all the time. Only you can know how much you can handle. I am not going to force it on you, Harry. If you don't want it, you don't have to take it. This also is not a one time offer. The entire staff—well, those who know of this—are here to help if you need us. If I am not available, you need to know you can trust someone who can pass the information on to me."

"Yes sir," Harry said with a nod. Out of all of the teachers Harry really only felt comfortable with Professor McGonagall when it came to anything personal. Other than being his Head of House, McGonagall had looked out for him over the past few years. She also had spent time at the Black Manor over the summer talking with Harry whenever she could. Professor McGonagall had been one of the selected few to see Harry's memory of the graveyard and had taken what she had seen rather hard.

"Under that tough armor she's a softy," James said fondly.

"Yeah, even when she is yelling at us you can see that deep down she loves us deeply and we are her favorite students," Sirius smiled.

"I wouldn't go that far Padfoot," Remus chuckled.

"Maybe not James and Sirius. God knows how hard it is to love them. But you are definitely McGonagall's favorite Remus," Lily said and Remus blushed. "She's always going on about how those two should be more like you."

"Teacher's pet," James coughed.

Dumbledore gave Harry's shoulder another gentle squeeze before standing up. "Dobby took the liberty of bringing a change of clothes for you," he said pleasantly. "I believe breakfast will be starting soon so unless you have any questions, we will leave you to change."

"What happens now?" Harry asked.

Professor Dumbledore moved to the bedside table, picked up Harry's glasses and handed them over. "You see, Harry, we are in a slight predicament with the presence of Professor Umbridge," he said honestly as Harry put his glasses on.

"Understatement of the year," Lily snorted.

"If something like this happens again, I must suggest you tell Professor McGonagall immediately. She will pass it on to me. As much as it pains me, Harry, we can't appear to be any more than Headmaster and student to Professor Umbridge. I don't want her to use you to get to me."

Harry finally realized that it was Professor McGonagall standing in the doorway. Her normal stern gaze was absent from her face as she looked at Harry sympathetically. Returning his gaze to Dumbledore, Harry noticed that there was no twinkle in his blue eyes. "What if I contact Sirius and Remus?" Harry asked. "They could pass on the message too? No offense, Professor McGonagall, but couldn't you get in trouble with this arrangement?"

"I am your Head of House, Harry," Professor McGonagall said with a smirk. "I'm supposed to look out for you. We can work something out, don't worry."

"Why Minnie, how Slytherin of you," Sirius smirked.

"Say that to her Sirius and we will never find your body parts," Lily said knowingly.

Harry still felt nervous of involving Professor McGonagall but he nodded in understanding. Once Dumbledore and McGonagall left, Harry quickly changed into his uniform and took his potion before leaving for the Gryffindor Tower to grab his school bag, bidding goodbye to Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall as he ran past them. It was still early but unlike previous mornings students were already awake and in the halls.

Reaching the Fat Lady portrait, Harry waited impatiently for it to open after he gave the password and nearly ran into Ron and Hermione in his haste. Without a word, Harry pulled them to follow as he ran up to his dorm room and immediately checked to make sure they were alone. He couldn't chance anyone overhearing anything now.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked instantly as Harry closed the door. "Did something happen this morning?"

Harry looked at his best friends and let out a deep breath. There was no other way to do this other than to just say it. "I had a vision last night," he said in a quiet but urgent voice. "Voldemort's awake and he knows everything that's happened." Harry turned away and started pacing, the reality of everything finally hitting him. Now he had the Ministry, Death Eaters *and* Voldemort to worry about. "My scar was hurting! It hasn't hurt since that nightmare I had. Why now? I don't need this!"

It had been so easy not to think of Voldemort when he had been in a coma but that wasn't the case anymore. The Death Eaters now had their leader back and wouldn't be hiding anymore. Voldemort wanted answers about what happened but how was he going to get them? It wasn't like there was a book written about the magical outbursts of Harry Potter and where to join. The only way anyone was going to get information on this was to get it from the source or someone close to the source.

Sirius and Remus.

"Harry James Potter," Remus said sternly. "Don't worry about me and Padfoot we are responsible adults. Scratch that, we are adults and I am responsible and we can take care of ourselves."

"See, hear that James?" Lily said rubbing James' back. "They can take care of themselves." James shrugged but he was looking worried and biting his nails.

"You're sure he's awake?" Ron asked in an uneasy voice. "*You-Know-Who?* The—the *thing* that tried to kill you in June?"

Harry stopped pacing and looked at Ron with a raised eyebrow. "No Ron, it's the *other* Dark Lord named Voldemort who wants me dead," he said sarcastically as he sat down on the nearest bed. Burying his face in his hands, Harry knew he needed to calm down. It didn't pay to start a fight with his friends. "Sorry," Harry said to Ron. "I just feel like my head's going to explode. He's out there and all I can do is wait for his move."

"So there's no point in worrying about it now," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Let's just concentrate on getting through the day, Harry. Don't think about You-Know-Who. He can't get to you here, Dumbledore wouldn't let it happen; we wouldn't let it happen. We have your back, Harry, remember that."

Harry nodded as he let out a breath. Hermione was right. He had a long day ahead of him and worrying about what Voldemort may be up to would only make it longer. Realistically Harry knew there was no way he was going to forget about this and made a mental note to talk to Professor McGonagall as soon as possible about Sirius and Remus' safety or perhaps talk to Sirius and Remus directly. He didn't know what he would do if something happened to them.

"Nothing is going to happen," Sirius said confidently.

Once Harry collected his school bag and everything he would need, he followed Ron and Hermione to the Great Hall for a quick breakfast. The moment they sat down Ginny handed

over the latest edition of the 'Daily Prophet' and on the front page was a picture of Professor Umbridge underneath the large headline that read:

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED

FIRST EVER HIGH INQUISITOR

"High what now?" Lily asked worried.

They read the article in a shocked silence to learn that the Ministry was taking their desire to control what happens at Hogwarts a step further by creating laws and positions. It was stated that Fudge had created a rule stating if Dumbledore couldn't find someone for a position, the Ministry shall do it for him. That explained how someone as unqualified as Umbridge became a teacher. The article also stated that Umbridge had been keeping in contact with Fudge about matters to keep the Ministry up-to-date.

"Like we didn't know she would," James grunted.

As if this wasn't enough, the article continued on stating that Fudge had passed Educational Decree Number Twenty-three to create the position of Hogwarts High Inquisitor which allows someone to inspect the teachers at Hogwarts to make sure they're teaching at the Ministry's standards which was almost hilarious. The one teacher who wasn't actually teaching anything has to power to evaluate the entire teaching staff.

"That's just their way of controlling the staff. Unless they think like Fudge they'll be sacked," Remus growled angrily.

What wasn't hilarious was the fact that Lucius Mafloy was quoted in the article, supporting the motion or the bit that was written about Remus, Hagrid and Mad-Eye Moody being unstable teachers.

"Hey! Moony isn't unstable!" Lily cried angry. And James and Sirius growled in agreement.

Remus, Hagrid and Mad-Eye were three of the best people Harry knew. Remus was a wonderful teacher and Mad-Eye had brought his first hand experience to the classroom when he finally got the chance to teach. Hagrid certainly had a unique perspective to things but he understood the dangers of the forest like no one else Harry knew.

With as late as they were running, Harry, Ron and Hermione didn't have a chance to protest the latest news before hurrying off to History of Magic. The dull class passed by without an appearance from Professor Umbridge. She didn't show up in Potions either. The moonstone essays were handed back. Ron hid his instantly while Harry could only let out a sigh when he saw a large 'A' written in the upper right-hand corner. He had read about the OWL grading system during the summer to know that an 'A' meant Acceptable. Harry had honestly thought he had done better than Acceptable.

"I bet you did Harry but Snivellus was just being mean and completely unfair," Sirius said scowling.

"You all will find that your grades are what you would have received if this had been in your OWL," Snape said coldly as he returned to his desk. "I am disgusted with the majority of the assignments that I received. Most of you would have failed! I am expecting to see a drastic improvement for this week's essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes. If there is not an improvement, I may have to start giving detentions for those dunderheads who receive a 'D'."

Harry kept his eyes on Professor Snape but noticed Hermione glancing over to see what he had received. Her sigh of relief was an obvious sign that she saw Harry wasn't one of the many who had failed the essay. After Snape's speech, the class had to brew a Strengthening Solution which Harry had been determined to complete correctly. When he was finished, Harry had to admit that it looked like it was supposed to. The clear substance had a turquoise shade to it and looking over at Hermione's; he saw that hers looked similar. At the end of class, Harry handed in a flask of his potion then hurried out of the classroom with Ron and Hermione following.

"Well, I must say that at least he's preparing us," Hermione said as they walked up the stairs to the Entrance Hall. "Everyone says the OWLs are hard. I just wish Professor Snape would give us pointers to help us improve. Passing is okay now but what about when the test comes? If Professor Snape only takes the top scores we need to know what we can do to obtain them."

"Since when does Snape do anything like that?" Harry asked as they walked through the Entrance Hall and into the Great Hall. "If we want to do better, we will obviously have to do it ourselves. From what I've read about the OWLs Snape has nothing to do with the examinations. It's a standardized test that Snape will never see, only our scores."

"You know, I don't think Snape is a very good teacher," Lily said wincing.

"Just figuring that one now?" James asked.

"No," she huffed, "But Hermione is right. A teacher should tell them how to improve not just undermine their self-esteem."

Ron looked at Harry horrified as they sat down at the Gryffindor table. "You've read about the OWLs?" he asked in shock. "Why?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he started to fill his plate. "Remember what I told you how I was at the beginning of the summer," he said. "Remus kept talking about the OWLs so I figured that since I was bored it didn't hurt to know a little more about them, at least the grading system."

"Figures Moony would talk about the OWLs," Sirius rolled his eyes and shook his head at his friends.

"Yeah, he was nagging in our ears about OWLs since about first year," James chuckled. "We are actually surprised he hasn't yet come up with a study plan for our NEWTs yet."

"Actually—" Remus started but was cut off by identical moans of:

"NO!"

"It certainly is different from the way Muggles grade," Hermione added as Fred, George and Lee Jordan (a tall boy with dreadlocks who was a good friend with the Weasley twins and the commentator for the Quidditch matches) arrived as sat down across the table from them. "The top grade for OWLs is 'O' for 'Outstanding' then 'A'—"

"There's 'E' before 'A', Hermione," George corrected as he started to fill his plate. "Let's see, 'E' is for 'Exceeds Expectations', then there's 'A' for Acceptable, 'P' for 'Poor' and 'D' for 'Dreadful', Snape gives that one a lot."

"Obviously," James drawled.

"Don't forget 'T'," added Fred, "for 'Troll'. We can think of quite a few Slytherins who would be happy with that grade." Hermione rolled her eyes at the comment regardless of how true it may be. "So, have you had any inspected lessons yet?"

"No, we haven't," Hermione said as she leaned closer, eager for information. "Have you?"

Fred, George and Lee nodded as they rolled their eyes in annoyance. "Charms," said George. "I don't know how Flitwick could stand her lurking in the corner and making notes. Sometimes that guy's too cheery for his own good. Umbridge did ask Alicia a few questions but nothing other than that."

"Professor Flitwick is very nice. He always has a kind word for everyone," Lily said happily.

"Teacher's pet," Sirius coughed and Lily scowled at him.

Remus on the other hand was grimacing, "I think Flitwick has goblin blood somewhere in his line, and that isn't going to set well with Umbridge if she is so against none-humans. He'll be on her watch list no matter how good and polite he is."

"But she wouldn't dare sack him. He's a Hogwarts institution. He's always been there. It's like getting rid of McGonagall, Dumbledore or Hagrid. There's no Hogwarts without them!" James cried.

"Believe me, Umbridge would be quite happy to get rid of all three of them," Lily said grimly.

"This entire Inquisitor thing is completely pointless," said Lee in a hushed voice. "What are they going to do? Fire everyone who can teach us anything and hire more flakes like Umbridge?"

"Probably," Lily scowled.

"I'll elect for home schooling if that happens," Harry muttered. He really didn't think he could handle any more people watching him, waiting for him to make a stupid mistake. "Sirius and Remus are better teachers than anyone the Ministry could assign."

"We sure are," Sirius said proudly.

"We'll only let you if we can join you," Fred said with a grin. "After all, who better to teach us than the Marauders?"

For Harry and Ron, they didn't have to wait long for an inspected class. Just as they were pulling out their dream journals in Divination, the trap door opened and Professor Umbridge emerged with a flowery bag draped over her shoulder. Harry suppressed a groan as he accepted The Dream Oracle from Professor Trelawney. Two classes in a row with Umbridge. Could this day get any worse?

"Good afternoon, Professor," Umbridge said with a smile. "I trust that you received my notice of your inspection?"

Professor Trelawney nodded before returning to handing out books but now with a nervous hand. Umbridge must have noticed because her smile widened before she moved an armchair to the front of the class, slightly behind Professor Trelawney's chair.

"She's just plain nasty," Lily said disgusted.

Once she sat down, Professor Umbridge reached into her bag and pulled out a clipboard before looking up at Professor Trelawney as if she were silently saying: 'I'm ready, you may start now.'

"Today, we shall continue studying prophetic dreams," Trelawney began with a slight waver to her voice. "Break off into pairs and interpret each other's latest dreams with The Dream Oracle as your guide."

Harry opened The Dream Oracle as he tried desperately to ignore Professor Umbridge's presence. He was glad he was sitting in the back of the room, far away from the toad-like woman. Umbridge didn't remain in her seat for long. It was only a few minutes before she stood up and started following Professor Trelawney around, asking questions whenever she felt like it.

"Should we use the vision you had last night?" Ron whispered. "I'd love to see what Umbridge after hearing something like that."

"She'd probably give us detention for disrupting the class," Harry muttered. "Besides we can't have everyone knowing that I have dreams about Voldemort. Can you imagine what the Ministry would do once they found that out?" Harry let out a sigh as he flipped through his dream journal. "The rest of my dreams don't make any sense. Colors, voices and feelings. That's all I remember."

Ron started flipping through The Dream Oracle. "Er—well, what were the feelings?" he asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "It's hard to explain," he said honestly. "It was like a strong sense of wanting to protect something, something important. There was also fear but it wasn't as strong...Why?"

Ron cleared his throat and looked closer at the page he was reading in the book. "Well, it could be something as simple as a forgotten task," he offered then started flipping through the pages. "Or maybe you are serving as a conduit for someone else. Weird. I hope it's the first one. How can people make predictions when it could mean completely different things?"

"Hence why this topic isn't usually taken seriously," Harry said with a grin.

"So true Harry, so true," James grinned.

Professors Trelawney and Umbridge were only a table away. Harry silently hoped that they wouldn't approach. The last thing he needed was for Trelawney to predict his death with Umbridge right there. Although it looked like Professor Trelawney was becoming more and more agitated as more time passed. She obviously didn't like that someone was watching her like this.

"Professor," Umbridge said at last, "how long exactly have you been at this post?"

"Almost sixteen years," Trelawney answered cautiously.

Umbridge made a note on her clipboard. "I see," she said. "Professor Dumbledore hired you, correct?" Professor Trelawney nodded then watched as Professor Umbridge made another note. "I believe you are the great-great-granddaughter of the celebrated Seer Cassandra Trelawney is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right," Professor Trelawney answered proudly.

"And you are the first in your family since Cassandra to be possessed of Second Sight," Umbridge asked as she made another note. "The first in four generations, is that right?" She made yet another note. "I see. Well, could you possibly predict something for me then?"

"Even if she was a real Seer, which I quite doubt, that's not how a prediction works," Remus said annoyed. "You can't just decide to have one. That's why the whole fortune telling thing is such bogus."

"Excuse me?" asked Professor Trelawney as if she had been slapped. "The Inner Eye does not See upon command! Anyone with an ounce of knowledge in this area knows that! Forcing the Eye to See could be dangerous for any Seer!"

"Hmm, so you say," Professor Umbridge said in a sweet and soft voice as she wrote down a few more notes. "This has been extremely, *enlightening*, Professor. Thank you." Without

another word Umbridge walked back over to her chair and sat down where she continued writing down notes, not saying another word for the remainder of the class.

"You know, I hate Trewlaney but I have to admit I'm kind of sorry for her now," James said and the others nodded.

Umbridge was the first to leave the moment the bell rang and was waiting for everyone in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom when everyone arrived ten minutes later. She looked extremely pleased with herself which made Harry's stomach churn. If she was that way with Professor Trelawney, Harry was glad that Hagrid wasn't back yet. He didn't want to think what Umbridge would do to him.

"That's going to be horrible," Lily fretted.

"And Hagrid doesn't do well under pressure. I just hope he doesn't show them any dangerous creature," Sirius said worried.

"Wands away everyone," Professor Umbridge said with a smile as class began and waited for everyone to comply. "Now, since we finished Chapter One in the last lesson, please turn to page nineteen and begin reading Chapter Two: Common Defensive Theories and their Derivation. There is no reason for talking so I expect silence. Begin."

Harry let out a sigh as he opened his book to the correct page. *Great.* Just what Harry needed to take his mind off of things was to read an extremely boring book written by someone who clearly had no firsthand experience on the topic. He was starting to wonder if Umbridge would notice if he charmed a more interesting book to resemble his text book. Then at least he could learn something during these boring classes.

The sound of Umbridge pushing her chair back snapped Harry out of his thoughts as he looked up and noticed that Hermione's hand was in the air. Glancing at the short teacher, Harry saw her walking around the front row of desks until she was face to face with Hermione. "What is it, Miss Granger?" Professor Umbridge whispered as she leaned closer to Hermione.

"I've read Chapter Two already," Hermione said, her voice carrying throughout the room. "I've read the entire book."

That certainly wasn't what Umbridge had been expecting. She blinked a few times before a skeptical look appeared on her face. "If that is the case then you would be about to tell me what Mr. Slinkhard says concerning counter-jinxes in Chapter Fifteen."

Hermione smiled. "He says that counter-jinxes are improperly named," she said immediately. "He says 'counter-jinx' is a name people give actual jinxes to make them sound more acceptable but I disagree with that. It's obvious that Mr. Slinkhard doesn't like jinxes but they can be very useful when used in a defensive matter."

"Is that so?" Professor Umbridge asked, her eyes narrowing for a moment before she straightened herself and fought to keep her face neutral. "Unfortunately, Miss Granger, it is Mr. Slinkhard's opinion what matters in this classroom. *Not yours*—" Her gaze shifted to Harry for a moment before it returned to Hermione, "and not anyone else's. Is that clear?"

"Hey, Harry didn't say anything!" Sirius cried.

"Yeah! Don't go looking at him!" James growled.

Remus shook his head and sighed, "Hermione is just playing into Umbridge's game. She's going to either end up in trouble or get Harry into trouble."

Hermione didn't agree. "But—"

"That is quite enough, Miss Granger," Professor Umbridge said firmly then walked back to her desk and sat down. "I'm afraid I will have to take five points from Gryffindor house for pointlessly disrupting my class. Interrupt again and I will have to assign detention. I'm here to teach the Ministry-approved method, not indulge in children's fantasies. Now, back to Chapter Two everyone."

"See," Remus said sadly.

"I bet she would love Hermione to interrupt so she can make an example of her," Lily scowled.

No one spoke for the remainder of the class. The moment class was over everyone hurried out of the room, not wanting to spend anymore time with Umbridge than what was absolutely necessary. Hermione was completely silent during dinner and throughout the night. Harry and Ron didn't know what to do and ended up working on as much homework as they could before calling it a night.

The next morning Harry awoke with a start, feeling more exhausted than he had in a while. He had a strange dream about a long dark corridor, finishing in a dead end with a locked door. The dull ache he felt from his scar didn't help matters either. With great reluctance, Harry pulled himself out of bed, cleaned up and changed before leaving the Gryffindor Tower for the hospital wing to receive his potion. Once that was done, Harry ended up in the Great Hall, writing his dream down in his dream journal.

As he put his dream journal away, Harry suddenly remembered the first thing that happened yesterday morning and realized that with everything going on he had forgotten to talk to Sirius and Remus about Voldemort. After eating a quick breakfast, Harry hurried back to the Gryffindor Tower and pulled out his mirror from his trunk. It was still early so Harry cast a few silencing charms and closed his hangings before calling Sirius' name. It was still early but he didn't want to put off contacting his guardians any longer than he had.

It wasn't long before the face of Remus appeared in the mirror. "Good morning, cub," Remus said with a smile. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Harry wasn't able to return the smile. Seeing Remus' face brought all of Harry's fears concerning his guardians to the surface. "Remus, I know I'm going to sound paranoid but I need you to promise me that you and Sirius will be careful," he said urgently. "Don't let Sirius go off on his own and make sure he keeps his temper under control, please?"

"You know Harry? I should be offended by this. I don't see you telling Moony to not go off on his own or keep his temper," Sirius sniffed.

"That's because he knows you Paddy," James chuckled.

Remus' smile had completely vanished and was replaced by a look of concern. "Harry, what's going on?" he asked cautiously. "Did something happen? Did you have another vision last night? Is your scar hurting?"

"A little but I'll live," Harry said quickly. "How much did Professor Dumbledore tell you about my vision two nights ago?"

Remus shrugged. "Not much; just that you had dreamed about Voldemort waking up and calling his Death Eaters. Dumbledore also told us you had an outburst that was more powerful than what you could handle afterwards. Why?"

Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "Because Voldemort is determined to find out about these outbursts," he admitted. "He's going to go after the two of you, I know it. Please, *please* be careful!"

"Harry's concern would be so cute if it weren't tragic," Lily sighed.

"Back at you, cub," Remus said sincerely. "I'll let Padfoot know and I promise that we'll be careful, okay?" He waited for Harry to nod in acceptance. "Now, how's everything going? Is Umbridge abusing her position yet?"

"YES!" four voices cried.

"Do you really need me to answer that?" Harry asked rhetorically. "It's been hard not to say anything in class, especially when Umbridge starts going off on her 'Ministry's right, you're wrong, they're smart and you're dumb' speeches. I don't understand how the Ministry could do this with as many complaints they've gotten about her."

"You're not the only one," Remus said honestly. "I know this is hard for you, Harry, especially with everything that's happened in the last few days. As difficult as it may be, try not to think of Voldemort. He certainly won't attack Hogwarts having just woken up from a coma. Remember your calming techniques. Focus on what you can control. Sirius and I are protected here so don't worry about us, all right?"

James put the book down and walked to the bed. He bent over and his face was almost touching Remus'. Remus eyes were wide and he was a little uncomfortable, "Are you sure that you are protected Moony?"

"I must be," Remus said weakly. James nodded and went back to his spot and the book.

Harry nodded, starting to feel his anxiety leaving. Remus was right. It didn't pay to worry about matters that he had no control over. He had done what he could in warning Remus about the possibility of Voldemort targeting the Marauders. He just hoped that Sirius would listen to the warning. Ever since he escaped Azkaban, Sirius had hated being confined. He loved his freedom and always made the most of it.

"What else is on your mind, cub?" Remus asked after a moment of silence.

"Nothing that I can't handle," Harry said with a soft smile hoping to reassure the man. "I was just worried about the two of you. I'll contact you if anything comes up, okay?"

"Fair enough," Remus said with a nod. "You know we'll do the same. Take care of yourself, Harry, and try to have a little fun. You look like you need it."

Harry bid farewell to Remus then hid the mirror in his trunk. He noticed that Ron's bed was empty along with Neville's while Dean and Seamus were tying desperately to cling on to a few more moments of rest. Grabbing his school bag, Harry headed to the Great Hall where he noticed that Ron and Hermione were talking quietly to each other as they ate. This struck Harry as odd. Usually whenever Ron and Hermione talked they fought about something petty. Now it almost looked as if they were up to something.

Suspicious only increased when Harry approached his friends and they instantly silenced, turning to Harry with large smiles on their faces. *Oh yeah, this definitely isn't a good thing. They are up to something.* "Good morning," Harry said cautiously as he sat down. "What's going on?"

"Ron, Hermione," Sirius shook his head. "You need lessons in stealth. You can't give yourselves away like that. I must teach you the ways."

"Just talking about Umbridge," Ron said with a shrug. "I think this is the first morning I was up before you, huh Harry?"

Harry smiled. "Nice try," he said, aware that Ron was trying to change the topic. "I was talking to Remus. I put silencing charms around my bed so I didn't wake anyone up. You two aren't going to do anything that will get us in trouble with Umbridge are you?"

Hermione looked at Harry innocently. "Not at all," she said with a smile. "Come on, we need to get to Charms. We don't want to be late."

"Yep, they are up to something big!" Lily said looking sternly at James and Sirius.

"Lily, you do know Moony is the brains of our operations don't you?" James said pointing at Remus and she scowled at him. Remus gave her a shy, innocent smile and her scowl vanished.

Harry followed Ron and Hermione out of the Great Hall and to the Charms classroom. He really didn't like this. Ron and Hermione were clearly up to something by why were they keeping it a secret from him? *Perhaps they know I won't help them with it.* That was certainly a possibility. Harry had made himself clear when it came to the matter of Professor Umbridge. He needed to stay in the shadows in her class and when she was around. He didn't have any other choice.

Entering the Transfiguration classroom for the second class of the day, Harry had to bite his tongue when he noticed Professor Umbridge sitting in the corner with her clipboard in hand. This was certainly going to be an interesting class. Everyone knew that the Deputy Headmistress was faithful to the Headmaster. Even if she didn't agree with Dumbledore's decisions, Professor McGonagall went along with them. Right now, that sort of thinking made McGonagall an enemy to the Ministry and Umbridge.

Harry, Ron and Hermione took their usual seats as Professor McGonagall entered the room, walking past Umbridge without any sort of acknowledgement of the woman's presence. Silence fell as McGonagall reached her desk and turned around to face the class. "Mr. Finnigan, please come up here and hand back the homework," she said. "Miss Brown, take this box of mice—" McGonagall let out a sigh let Lavender let out a soft shriek, "—oh that is quite enough. They can't hurt you. Hand one out to each student."

"Hem, hem," Professor Umbridge said, apparently faking a cough but her attempt to attract attention was ignored.

Seamus handed back the essays quickly. Receiving his, Harry couldn't help smiling when he saw an 'E' on it before putting it in his school bag. Ron was also smiling, having received an 'A' on his assignment. One look at Hermione's large smile told them that she did well on her homework too. Each of them were handed a mouse by Lavender who seemed to be completely disgusted with her job. Holding onto their mouse carefully, Harry and Ron returned their attention to Professor McGonagall for instruction.

"Listen closely everyone," Professor McGonagall announced. "Most of you have vanished your snails successfully and those who have not managed to vanish enough to get the overall idea of the spell. Today, we shall be—"

"Hem, hem," Umbridge interrupted again.

"Yes, Professor?" Professor McGonagall asked as she looked directly at Umbridge.

"I was curious, Professor, if you had received my note concerning the date and time of your inspection—"

"I obviously did or I would have inquired to what you are doing in my classroom," McGonagall said sternly then turned away from Umbridge and to the class. "Now, today we shall be

practicing the altogether more difficult Vanishment of mice. The Vanishing Spell becomes more—”

“*Hem, hem.*”

“You know. Umbridge is just setting herself for the fall,” Sirius said grinning eagerly.

Professor McGonagall let out a sigh, her patience clearly wearing thin. “*Professor Umbridge, you are here to observe how I instruct my class,*” she said sternly. “Being a teacher yourself I would think you would understand not to interrupt with *pointless matters.*”

“Oh, dear, dear Minnie,” James sighed contently. “We can always count on you.”

Professor Umbridge eyes widened at the statement before she started scribbling on her clipboard while Professor McGonagall returned her attention to the class. “As I was saying, the Vanishing Spell becomes more difficult when the complexity of the animal increases. You need absolute concentration. Let’s see you all try.”

For the remainder of the class, Professor Umbridge remained in the corner furiously taking notes. Harry did his best to ignore her and concentrated on vanishing his mouse. He was slowly making progress. McGonagall was right. It required a lot of concentration. So far he had managed to vanish the front half of the mouse.

“That’s a disturbing image,” Lily shivered.

Professor McGonagall monitored everyone’s progress, offering words of advice when she felt it was necessary. She finally approached Harry’s desk and gave him a soft smile of reassurance before leaning closer. “See me after class, Harry,” McGonagall whispered before moving on to the next desk.

“Why?” Sirius whispered.

“Don’t know,” James answered in a whisper.

“Why are you two whispering?” Remus asked in the same way.

“Dunno, why are you?” Sirius asked and Remus fell back on the bed shaking his head.

Once class was finally over, Harry stayed back as everyone else filtered out of the room after placing the mice back in the box. Professor McGonagall had retreated to her desk and was

reaching in her desk drawer for something. Hoping that he hadn't done any wrong, Harry walked up to McGonagall with a nervous look on his face. His mind was quickly running through everything in the past few days but he couldn't find anything that he had done wrong.

Professor McGonagall gave Harry another reassuring smile. "Professor Dumbledore wanted me to give this to you, Harry, if you wanted it," she said softly as he handed over a wood case and waited for Harry to open it and see a necklace of square black, glasslike beads. It was the suppression necklace. The middle bead was slightly larger than the others. "Professor Dumbledore has charmed the necklace for you to basically turn it on and off as you please. To turn it on, touch the middle bead and say 'Activate'. To turn it off, touch the bead and say 'Deactivate'."

"This way Harry can use it only when he can't control the outburst," Lily said pleased. "That's good."

"What's the difference?" James asked.

"This way, Harry will learn to control them, because he can decide when it's too big an outburst for him or not. Eventually he won't need it anymore. It's like the small training wheels parents put on children's bicycles to help them learn. After a while you are not actually using them anymore but they are still there in case you need them. It gives them confidence," Lily explained.

"What small wheels?" Sirius asked.

"Didn't you use them when you learned to ride a bicycle?" she asked.

"I learned to ride brooms," he said firmly, "And there were no wheels there."

Harry closed the case and looked at Professor McGonagall with a soft smile on his face. He had completely forgotten about Dumbledore's offer. "Thanks, Professor," Harry said and discreetly put the case in his school bag. "Please thank Professor Dumbledore for me."

Professor McGonagall nodded as she stood up. "Very well, Mr. Potter," she said sternly. "On your way."

Harry nodded and left the classroom, noticing Professor Umbridge was waiting with an impatient look on her face. She cast a suspicious glare at Harry before turning her attention to Professor McGonagall. This could be an interesting conversation to overhear but Harry didn't think he could take the chance considering the looks Umbridge had been giving him.

As if Transfiguration hadn't been enough, Umbridge was also present for Care of Magical Creatures. She was already there questioning Professor Grubbly-Plank when Harry, Ron and Hermione arrived for class. Harry made a point to stand far away from Professor Umbridge, something Ron and Hermione were all too happy to oblige along with the rest of the Gryffindors. None of them were fond of the new teacher.

As class began, Professor Umbridge started wandering through the grouping of students, questioning some and walking past others. Harry did what he could to ignore her distracting actions and focus on Professor Grubbly-Plank who was talking Porlocks and Kneazles. Umbridge didn't stay much longer. After asking a few students questions about Hagrid, Professor Umbridge notified Grubbly-Plank that she would receive results of the inspection within ten days and left for the castle. Thankfully Harry didn't see Umbridge for the remainder of the day.

"Good, she is a *very* unpleasant sight," Remus muttered darkly.

That night Harry quickly buried himself in his homework. It had been another long day and Harry couldn't wait to call it a night but he was determined to finish his homework first. His scar had been aching all day and was really starting to get irritating. Without even realizing it, Harry was continuously rubbing his scar with his left hand while writing with his right. It didn't make the pain away but it wasn't making it any worse either.

"Are you okay Harry?" Hermione asked softly, breaking the silence.

Harry nodded. He really didn't want to start talking about his scar and Voldemort now. "It's just a headache," he said offhandedly.

Hermione glanced at Ron before inhaling deeply and turning back to Harry. "Look, I think it's clear that we're not going to learn any sort of actual Defense from Professor Umbridge this year," she said in one breath.

"Good thing they have Hermione or they would never have figured that one by themselves," James said sarcastically.

"Oh, shush James. Let's see what she has to say," Lily scolded.

"I—er—well—I think we should start teaching ourselves." Harry looked at Hermione with a raised eyebrow. "You know we have to, Harry. None of us will be ready for our OWL practical

exam if we don't but that's not the only reason. With V—Voldemort back, we need to be prepared. We need to be able to defend ourselves."

"She is right there," Remus said. "But there is just so much you can learn from books. Some spells have to be demonstrated or you'll never understand the instructions. A book can't show you how slow or fast you have to swish for instance."

Sirius raised an eyebrow and said, "And you call yourself smart," he snorted. "Haven't you figured out what she's doing?"

"What?" James asked.

Sirius shook his head hiding his face in his hand, "So naïve."

"How do you expect to do that?" Harry asked in confusion. He didn't miss that Hermione had actually said Voldemort's name and from the partial flinch, neither did Ron. "I spent four years learning in the classroom and none of it made any difference at that graveyard or even that night on the grounds when I was attacked trying to protect Mr. Crouch. Sirius spent an entire summer running through survival scenarios with me and it still wasn't enough. It just isn't as easy as you're making it out to be."

"I know it's not easy," Lily said. "But it did help you survive so don't belittle it like that Harry James Potter!" she scolded.

"I'm not saying it'll be easy," Hermione corrected. "I know it will be hard work and I also know that this isn't something that can be accomplished in a normal classroom environment. We would also need a teacher with more knowledge than the majority of us and the ability to make the subject interesting."

"You're asking for a miracle," Harry muttered then returned to his essay. "Trying to accomplish something like this without letting Umbridge knowing is risky since it goes against 'the Ministry's regulations'."

"Yeah, if she finds out she'll arrest them all for treachery or something," James said grimly.

"So we make sure no one finds out," Hermione offered. "We can use the Room of Requirement. The room will change to whatever we need and could provide us with so many materials, don't you agree?"

Harry thought for a moment. Hermione was basically saying what he had originally planned on doing by himself. "It's feasible," Harry said carefully as he set his quill down. "The only problem I can think of is a teacher. Professor Flitwick would be a good choice but involving any teacher would mean having them risk their career for us. I wouldn't want to put anyone in that position."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Sirius sighed shaking his head. "Naïve just like your parents."

"I'm not thinking of an actual adult to teach us," Hermione said cautiously as she shot a quick glance at Ron who nodded for her to continue. "I was thinking more of a student that would be able to pass on his knowledge of personal experience."

"NO!" Lily said incredulously.

Harry looked at Hermione in confusion for a moment before realization dawned on him of who she was referring to. She wanted him to teach! Him—Harry Potter—a kid who attracts trouble like a magnet and one of the people that the Ministry is currently watching like a hawk! Confident that she was out of her mind, Harry looked at Ron for help but saw that he was eagerly awaiting an answer. Ron agreed with her!

"Told you!" Sirius said.

"She can't be serious!" Remus cried. "Umbridge is just waiting to catch Harry on something and she wants him to go out and start an illegal study group or something."

"It's not illegal," James offered.

"You can bet your broomstick James that Umbridge will make it illegal," Lily said.

"You're nutter," Harry said at last. "You know that, right? I'm not a teacher. I don't know how to teach. If anyone should do it, it should be you, Hermione. You've beaten me in every test—"

"—only the tests that were based on book knowledge," Hermione interrupted. "You beat me in the obstacle course Remus set up in our third year. I couldn't defeat my Boggart. Sirius and Remus have been teaching you Defense for what—three summers now? That doesn't include the Patronus lessons Remus gave you through your third year. It's not only that, Harry. Think of what you've done."

"Don't think we want to, thanks Hermione," James said darkly.

Harry instantly paled as he inhaled sharply. That was the last thing he wanted to do. "Let's not, okay?" he said softly. "I don't want to *think* about watching a good friend die. I don't want to think about seeing Cedric and my parents appear out of Voldemort's wand urging me to hang on when I wanted nothing more than to give up. I *can't* think about what was running through my head when that Death Eater pulled me out of the train, ready to take me to wherever Voldemort was kept. Must I remind you that the person you are ready to put so much faith into couldn't stand up to his Muggle uncle? Must I remind you how many times those little escapades that you're so ready to brag about nearly cost me my life?"

Hermione and Ron's gazes fell as they looked slightly ashamed of bringing up such a sensitive topic.

"To right you should," Lily said crossing her arms.

"We didn't mean...sorry Harry," Ron said softly then looked up at Harry in confusion. "What do you mean Diggory and your parents came out of Voldemort's wand?"

Harry inhaled deeply, trying to remain calm. He couldn't believe he let that slip. Letting out a slow breath, Harry shook his head and started putting his homework away. "If you want to learn, fine," he said evenly. "I understand that you want to prepare yourselves. I can give you advice if you need it but I won't teach. You two don't realize that most of what I survived was complete and utter luck. I made it up as I went along to survive. On the train, I wasn't trying to impress the entire school. I was fighting for my life and the chance to see Sirius and Remus again."

Standing up, Harry grabbed his school bag and looked directly at his best friends with a passive look on his face, trying to hide the hurt he felt deep inside, his memories of that night still fresh in his mind. "I thought my friends would understand that," he said softly. "I guess I was wrong."

The four kids winced.

"Ouch, that one was straight in the gut," James said.

Not waiting for a feeble apology, Harry retreated to his dorm room. He couldn't believe that Ron and Hermione had gotten caught up with the hype that Harry Potter was a hero. He wasn't a hero. He was just a kid who had a knack for surviving. Unfortunately everyone

around him didn't have the same luck. His parents had died because Voldemort was after him for some reason. Cedric died because Voldemort wanted him for the ritual.

Harry could feel his eyes burning as he crashed onto his bed and buried his face in his pillow. He had tried to be strong for so long. No one knew how much Harry looked up to Cedric. Cedric Diggory had every right to hate Harry for being in the Tournament but instead, Cedric looked out for the youngest champion. Cedric had protected Harry from Rita Skeeter and had given him friendship when most would turn their backs. There was no denying that Harry missed Cedric. Cedric treated him like a normal person, like an equal. It didn't matter that Cedric was three years older. It didn't matter that Harry was the-boy-who-lived.

Silent tears escaped Harry eyes, only to be absorbed into his pillow. Sirius and Remus had insisted that Cedric's death wasn't Harry's fault but Harry still felt guilty that, because of Voldemort's obsession with him, a good person had lost their life. How many more *good people* would lose their lives because of Voldemort? How many more families would Voldemort destroy? Remus had told Harry to focus on what he could control but Harry couldn't help it. The things in his life that he couldn't control were too overwhelming to ignore.

"Harry James Potter! You listen to Moony! It's a rule; everyone has to listen to Moony!" Sirius scolded.

"Since when?" Remus asked.

"Since ever," James said.

"You two don't," Remus pointed out.

"Of course we do. You just don't realize it because we know how to interpret what you really mean," Sirius said. "Like when you say 'don't prank Snivellus' we know you really mean 'don't prank Snivellus in a way you'll get caught.'"

James nodded and Remus and Lily rolled their eyes.

--

A/N- Thanks for your reviews. Hope you had fun!

I don't own any of this.

Chapter 10

Sense of Duty

"Something James and Sirius lack," Lily sighed.

"That's not true," James pouted. "We just have a slightly different view of duty than you. For instance; homework isn't duty."

"Behaving isn't duty," Sirius continued.

"Not blowing up the school isn't duty," James added. "Being there for your friends is duty."

"Fighting for what's right is duty," Sirius nodded.

"Fine," Lily sighed but she was fighting back a smile.

Not much happened over the next two weeks. Harry was able to participate in the bi-weekly Quidditch practices now, Ron was doing much better as Keeper with Madam Hooch's advice, Harry had managed to vanish his mouse completely and had moved on to vanishing kittens with Hermione, the hysteria the beginning of the term brought had finally died away, and nothing had been said about Harry teaching Defense. Ron and Hermione hadn't brought the subject up again after that night and had made an intense effort to give Harry his space.

The end of September also brought one significant change for Harry. Madam Pomfrey had finally proclaimed him healthy which meant no more early morning visits to the hospital wing. The relief Harry felt after hearing that had been indescribable. It was almost as if a large weight had been finally lifted off his shoulders. He was healthy again. There wasn't something looming over him anymore.

Another change for Harry was that he was now wearing the suppression necklace Dumbledore had created. It currently wasn't activated but Harry felt more secure knowing that the help was there if he needed it. The outburst the night Voldemort awakened had been the last one—big or small—Harry had which was unusual. This past summer he usually had a small one at least once a week.

"HARRY! Don't complain! Maybe they stopped," James said hopefully. Remus eyed him with pitiful eyes.

Working on Potions in the Library, Harry was wandering through the stacks, searching for Asiatic Anti-Venoms. He had noticed the whispers from Ron and Hermione that began the moment he left the table but didn't say anything about it. Whatever they were up to now, they clearly didn't want him involved. Harry didn't know if he was hurt or relieved by the thought.

As much as Harry didn't want to admit it he was afraid of Umbridge and what she could do. He knew she didn't approve of Remus and Sirius. Professor Umbridge made no point to hide her dislike for those of the non-human variety. According to Sirius, Umbridge had drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation two years ago which made it nearly impossible for any werewolf to get a job. The only reason Remus could was because he was the secondary guardian of the-boy-who-lived so many believed he wasn't as bad as the others.

"That's horrible," Lily said. "How does she expect them to survive if they can't have jobs?"

"That's exactly the point," James growled. "She doesn't."

Remus had not been happy to learn that Sirius had told Harry about that. He had insisted that it wasn't a big deal but anyone could tell that it was. Remus was an extremely private person when it came to matters of his lycanthropy. He didn't like others knowing what the curse put him through and took from him, including the right to be a father.

Sirius hugged Remus and James said, "We just want to make sure things like this are changed. If no one knows then how can they demand changes?"

"Harry?"

Turning around quickly, Harry let out a sigh of relief when he saw Cho standing there, looking at him hopefully. He had been so caught up in his thoughts to hear her coming. *I really need to stop doing that.* He didn't want to think what would have happened if it had been a Slytherin that had caught him off guard. "Hi Cho," Harry said finally. "Am I in your way?"

"Um—no," Cho said nervously as she shifted her weight back and forth. "I was wondering if we could talk about...you know."

Harry suppressed a groan as he forced himself to remember that Cho had been Cedric's girlfriend. He owed it to Cedric. "Sure," he said softly then motioned for her to follow. He

walked to the far back of the library and pulled out a chair at an empty table, Cho doing the same a moment later. They sat down and faced each other. *You can do this, Harry.* "What do you want to know?"

Cho started to fidget nervously as she avoided Harry's gaze. "What happened after you two disappeared from the maze?" she asked softly.

Sirius sighed, "That is not a happy topic."

"I know," Lily said. "But Cho deserves to know what happened so she can get closure."

"Knowing won't change it?" James said waving his hand.

"No, but it will stop her from imagining what happened. Imagine there is someone you love and one second they are there and the next they show up dead and the person that was next to him horribly tortured. You just know they were kidnapped by Voldemort. All you have is what you think may have happened and maybe Harry can tell her that things weren't as bad as she is imagining. That Cedric didn't suffer. Which he didn't, Harry suffered but Cedric didn't. So Harry can give her some measure of relief by telling her what happened," Remus explained.

"Still," Sirius complained. "I don't want to read it again."

"I'll go through it quickly Padfoot," James said.

"Yes, liking ripping off a band-aid," Lily said gently.

"A what?" Sirius and James asked.

Lily shook her head and muttered, "Purebloods."

Letting out a calming breath, Harry looked at Cho for a moment before his gaze fell to the floor. "We arrived at a graveyard," he said quietly. "We didn't know what was going on but it was obvious that something wasn't right. Before we could do anything a Death Eater by the name of Peter Pettigrew tried to kill Cedric with the killing curse. We evaded the curse then ran for it. Two Death Eaters chased us. I knew they were after me so I told Cedric to run for help while I tried to distract them. The plan didn't work. We were both caught." Letting out a breath, Harry tried not to think of what happened next. "I was bound to a headstone and could only watch as Cedric was murdered right in front of me. I tried...but I—I just couldn't stop them."

Cho grabbed Harry's hands and held them tightly as a soft sob escaped her lips. "It wasn't your fault, Harry," she said in a wavering voice. "Cedric wouldn't want you blaming yourself." Cho let out a long breath as she tried to calm herself down. "He never told me but I know he cared for you like a brother. The way he talked about you, he was so upset that you were forced to be in the Tournament. Cedric wanted to protect you, Harry, especially after that attack on the grounds."

"He was a nice bloke," James nodded.

"At least now she knows he didn't suffer and died trying to protect Harry. At least it gives his death some meaning. I know it's better if he hadn't died, but it will help her a little," Lily smiled sadly.

Harry slowly raised his head and met Cho's gaze. Why did everyone think he needed protecting? Everyone was ready to put the weight of the wizarding world on him yet no one had any faith that he could protect himself. Why? *Probably because everyone sees me injured most of the time.* Pushing away the thought for now, Harry tried to think of something—anything to say. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more to help him," Harry said at last.

Cho shook her head and managed a compassionate smile. "You did what you could, Harry," she said confidently. "Thank you for trying to help him and thank you for telling me. I know it couldn't have been easy." She gave Harry's hands a squeeze before releasing them and standing up. "If you ever want to talk—well, about anything, I'll listen, okay Harry?"

Harry nodded and looked up at Cho. "Thanks," he said with a smile. He really didn't feel comfortable talking with Cho about anything that would be bothering him but she was making an effort and he appreciated the gesture. Both of them were mourning the loss of Cedric and both of them were too afraid to do anything about that loss. They were afraid of forgetting the person Cedric had been.

Once Cho left, Harry returned to the stacks and finally found a book on the Anti-Venoms. He returned to his table where Ron was looking through a book but Hermione was nowhere in sight. Sitting down across from Ron, Harry looked around again but saw no sign of her. "Where's Hermione?" Harry asked curiously.

"Talking to the Hufflepuff Prefects," Ron said. "She's completely obsessed with it and is trying to drag me along with her. Fred and George have been teasing me nonstop about the whole Prefect thing, asking if I'm going to take points from them because they are still using first years to test their products."

"Prefects," Sirius snorted glaring at Remus and Lily. "Always taking the fun out of life."

Harry had to smile. He knew Fred and George could be merciless when it came to teasing Ron. "Why do you think they do that, Ron?" he asked curiously and received a shrug as an answer. "This is just a guess but they could be doing it because they know it annoys you. In the few years I've known Fred and George, I know that they like to do whatever they can to rile someone up. Remember in our second year when they would walk ahead of him and say 'Make way for the heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wizard coming through'?"

Ron let out a laugh. "I can't believe you remember that," he said with a smile but it quickly faded. "You're right, Harry. I guess I do let what they say bother me. I think most of the time it's because I wonder if they're right. I don't want to be another Percy. I don't like to discipline people."

"Yes, Harry is right. If you just ignore them they'll let you be," Lily said. "Too bad these two don't function like normal people and just keep pestering you if you ignore them," she sighed pointing at James and Sirius who were beaming proudly.

That was an understatement. Harry knew Ron was in a difficult position. After Bill and Charlie left there was Percy who was the rule abider followed by Fred and George who were the pranksters, two extremes leaving Ron somewhere in the middle. Ron wasn't a prankster but he certainly wasn't someone like Percy. It seemed that Ron was just trying to find out where in the spectrum he was the most comfortable.

"Could it be because you don't want them to be angry with you?" Harry offered. Seeing Ron's eyes fall to the table Harry knew he was right. "The problem is, Ron, you have been given a responsibility. You don't have to be as obsessive as Hermione but you can't shy away from it because you're afraid of how someone may react. I'm sure Hermione would be grateful for the support."

Ron sighed as he buried his face in his hands. "This is a bloody mess," he said, his voice muffled from behind his hands. "What was Dumbledore thinking? I never should have been made a Prefect!"

"Maybe he saw something in you that you haven't seen yet," Harry offered.

Ron instantly looked at Harry with a scowl on his face. "You know, it's extremely difficult to pity myself when you are talking like that," he said stubbornly as he enfolded his arms.

"When did you start talking like Dumbledore? You're supposed to say 'Ron, you're right. You shouldn't be a Prefect. Dumbledore is completely mad for not selecting me'."

"Harry would never say that," Sirius snorted. "Even if he thought it."

"He didn't-" Lily.

"Lils, yes he did. Harry was upset about not being chosen remember," James said raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, fine," Lily huffed. "He was."

Harry couldn't keep the look of amusement off his face. Both of them knew Harry would never say anything like that. "Why say something I don't mean?" he asked honestly. "I don't believe I could have handled the responsibility with everything else that was going on. My first priority was my heart, not making sure the first years, Fred and George behaved."

Ron gave Harry a grateful smile but it died quickly as Ron's gaze fell to the table. His hands fidgeted nervously. "Listen Harry," he said at last in a quiet voice. "I think you should know—"

"—hello!" Hermione said cheerfully as she sat down next to Ron with a huge smile on her face. "So what are you two talking about?"

"HERMIONE! Ron was about to tell us something!" James bellowed.

It was hard not to notice how big Ron's eyes became. Harry could clearly see that whatever Ron was about to say was something he didn't want Hermione to hear. "We're just talking about the mystery that is Ron Weasley," Harry said easily. "What are you so happy about?"

Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. "Just some Prefect stuff," she said evasively then looked at Harry curiously. "You were gone for a while, Harry. Did you get lost or something?"

"What is she up to?" Remus asked suspiciously.

"Don't know, but Ron was about to tell us and she ruined it," Sirius huffed.

"No, I didn't get lost, Hermione," Harry said, not appreciating her attempt at humor. Although he never would admit it he most likely knew the library better than anyone since he had spent half of the summer before his third year and the entire summer before his fourth year at

Hogwarts. "Cho wanted to talk about a few things so we went some place where no one would overhear us."

Ron quickly looked up at Harry and smiled. "Cho Chang, eh?" he asked. "She's pretty. Why didn't you tell us you fancy her?"

"Ron has effectively put his foot in his mouth and is going to get it," Lily said wisely.

If Ron had said that about anyone else Harry knew he would probably be embarrassed but not Cho. Harry felt offended, deeply offended. How could Ron say something like that? "She wanted to talk about Cedric," Harry said tensely as he forced himself to keep his voice down. "She was his girlfriend! She had questions about his death! I respect Cedric too much to do anything like you're suggesting."

Ron lost his smile quickly as he looked at Hermione for help but she was staring at Harry with a sympathetic look on her face. "Sorry Harry," he said softly as he returned his gaze to Harry. "I—er—I wasn't thinking. I forgot she dated Diggory."

"Clearly," Lily said annoyed.

"Give the poor kid a break Lily," Sirius said. "It's hard for a fifteen year old to always remember stuff like that. Harry could have taken it a little better. He didn't need to chew Ron's head off like that."

"I shudder to admit it," Remus said calmly, "But Padfoot is right."

"How's Cho doing?" Hermione asked gently.

Harry inhaled deeply as he looked at Hermione. "She's hurting," he said honestly. "She misses him just like any girlfriend would." He glanced over at Ron who appeared to be searching for something to say but couldn't find the words. Harry just shook his head and returned to his homework. He really didn't trust himself to say anything else right now. He didn't know why he was taking this so personally but to be truthful Harry didn't care. It just felt wrong for Harry to think of himself as going for Cedric's girlfriend.

The following weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend but Harry really didn't feel like going. After the misunderstanding in the library, Ron and Hermione had a tendency to talk quietly to each other or go off on their own, claiming that they had Prefect duties. Harry wasn't stupid.

He knew they were up to something but just let them be. It wasn't like he was being completely truthful with them either.

Harry hadn't told anyone that his scar was constantly hurting or of his strange dreams of the long dark corridors. He didn't know what they meant but he was really starting to hate them along with the trapped feeling that coursed through him from time to time. Harry figured the feeling had something to do with Voldemort since it hadn't started until after Voldemort had awoken. He couldn't explain what was happening so he just did his best to ignore it. He certainly didn't need another reminder that he wasn't normal.

"I don't think ignoring it is the best course of action," Remus said wisely.

"Maybe he'll tell us," Sirius shrugged then turned to James. "Harry go tell us about these dreams!"

James looked around and asked, "Why are you looking at me?"

"I'm not looking at you," Sirius huffed rolling his eyes. "I'm looking at the book you're holding."

When the morning of the Hogsmeade visit arrived, Harry was awake and in the Great Hall with the other early risers. Like many other students, Harry had slowly acquired a taste for coffee to pull him out of whatever haze his odd dreams had left upon him. His habit of rising early from the summer holidays prevented him from sleeping in and the chance of someone waking him to realize that he was casting silencing charms around his bed.

Just as he was finishing his coffee, Harry looked up to see Ron and Hermione, already dressed for a journey to Hogsmeade sit down across from him. Ron instantly started piling food on his plate while Hermione stared curiously at Harry, more so his attire than anything. Unlike Ron and Hermione who were wearing their cloaks over their jumpers and pants for the cool, early October morning, Harry was only wearing a long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

"Um...Harry, are you going to wear that to Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione. "It's a little cold out today."

Harry looked at Hermione and shrugged. "I really don't feel up to going to Hogsmeade today," he said. "I think I'll just catch up on some homework and maybe spend some time in the Room of Requirement."

Sirius and James glared at Remus who looked a little worried at the evil looks he was getting.

"What?" he asked.

"A perfectly nice Hogsmeade weekend and what is Harry doing? Homework! Whose fault do you think that is Prongs?" Sirius said.

"Moony's of course. Poisoning my poor innocent son with things like responsibility, homework...*books!*" James sobbed dramatically.

Ron leaned in closer to Harry, his plate full of food suddenly forgotten. "Your scar isn't acting up, is it?" he asked in a hushed voice. "Is this about your heart? I thought you said it wasn't a problem anymore."

"It isn't," Harry said truthfully. "I'm healthy and no, my scar isn't acting up. I just feel like going out in public...especially with everything that's happened. Everyone's finally stopped whispering about me here. I really don't want it to start up again with the adults at Hogsmeade. Call me a coward but I just don't want to deal with the whispering and finger pointing today."

Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic smile. "We understand, Harry," she said. "Why didn't you say something before?"

Harry shrugged. "It's really not that big of a deal," he said nonchalantly. "After spending the summer in seclusion I suppose the attention's affecting me more than it normally would." It was more or less the truth. Harry really didn't want to face the public but he also wanted some time alone to try to force an outburst and control it. It was a long shot but he had to try something.

"He is going to do what alone?" Lily shrieked.

"What if he gets a strong one and needs medical attention?" Sirius fretted, "Who will get it? James do something!"

James looked lost then gripping the book tightly he said sternly, "Harry James Potter, you will do no such thing!"

"But you normally spend your summers in seclusion," Ron said in confusion.

"Ron, think of everything that's happened," Hermione countered. "Harry has a right to feel overwhelmed by all of the attention." She then shifted her attention from Ron to Harry. "We

could spend the day in the Room of Requirement with you! We haven't been there since—" She thought for a moment "—February."

That was certainly not what Harry had been expecting. *Although it doesn't surprise me.* "I don't want you two to miss out because of me," he said. "You two go and have fun at Hogsmeade. I'll finish my homework and you can meet me in the Room of Requirement when you come back." Ron and Hermione didn't appear to be convinced. "I'll be fine, you two. You don't have to worry about Malfoy. He'll most likely be at Hogsmeade."

"Are you sure Harry?" Hermione asked. "We don't have to go if you don't want us to."

Harry looked at Hermione with a raised eyebrow. "If you two stay back because of me I refuse to talk to you for the remainder of the weekend," he threatened. "I appreciate the gesture, I really do, but I don't want you two to miss out on a day away from the castle because of me. Go. Have fun. You know where to find me when you come back."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, shrugged then looked back at Harry. "We won't be long," Ron said as he stood up with Hermione following suit. "Try not to work too hard. It is the weekend, you know."

Harry smiled as Hermione glared at Ron. He bid goodbye then watched as they left the Great Hall for Hogsmeade. Once he was certain they were gone, Harry left the Great Hall and casually strolled to the Room of Requirement. On the seventh floor opposite of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy was Harry's destination. He walked past it three times, focusing on a place where he could train physically and magically before a door appeared.

"I don't think he heard you James," Remus sighed.

Entering, Harry's eyes widened in disbelief as he looked around the large room. The walls were covered with a variety of martial arts weapons. Punching bags hung from the ceiling. The floor was covered with a supportive mat to prevent injuries. Dueling dummies stood in the far corner of the room. A cupboard stood right by the door which contained protective and first aid supplies.

"First aid supplies won't do you any good if you are knocked unconscious by an outburst!" Lily scolded.

Opening the cupboard, Harry figured he would get the physical training out of the way and pulled out a pair of boxing gloves. He removed his wand holster before strapping on the gloves and approaching one of the punching bags. After setting his wand and holster off to

the side, Harry started attacking the bag. He instantly felt his emotions leave as he focused on nothing but making contact with the stiff black bag. Nothing mattered outside making the bag move as much as possible.

After three-quarters of an hour Harry had to stop and found that his knuckles were extremely raw. He mentally cursed himself for not taking precautions to prevent it. Next Harry ran through the tae-kwon-do and tai chi exercises Sirius had taught him before taking a break. Not really wanting to leave, Harry called for Dobby who arrived immediately with a large lunch much to Harry's surprise. Sometimes he thought the little house elf knew him too well.

"At least someone knows where he is," Sirius said crossing his arms.

After lunch, Harry started on his magical training after grabbing his wand and putting his holster back on his wrist. He started off with the dueling dummies to practice accuracy before changing the room into an obstacle course with a variety of obstructions blocking his path, ranging from a simple sandbag coming out of nowhere to a Boggart taking the form of a Dementor that Harry immediately vanquished with a vengeance. He wasn't going to be caught off guard again.

Once the obstacle course vanished, Harry collapsed on a sofa couch that appeared, completely exhausted. He hadn't gone through a workout like that in a long time and would certainly be feeling it later. Waiting for his heart rate to return to normal, Harry holstered his wand and nearly jumped as a small table with a goblet of water appeared in front of him. He could really get used to this room and if today was any indication Harry figured he should definitely use it more often. His entire recovery had really restricted his stamina. There was no way he would last long in any duel at this point.

After emptying the goblet, Harry figured that Ron and Hermione would be arriving soon so he concentrated on a *private* place to clean up and saw a door appear on the wall to his right. Cautiously Harry opened the door to see a bathroom similar to the Prefects' Bathroom with an extremely large tub in the middle of the floor in the shape of a swimming pool. It was already filled with water, a layer of steam resting above it to serve as a notice of how warm the water was.

Once the door was locked, Harry wasted no time in undressing before diving in, instantly feeling a stinging pain from his knuckles. He let out a wince and quickly surfaced, making sure to keep his hands out of the water. As if the room noticed Harry's discomfort, the water

stared to change to a creamy white substance. Harry tentatively placed his hand in the liquid and was surprised that there was no burning only coolness.

He stayed in the soothing bath, finally feeling relaxed for the first time in a long time, until his fingers started to show signs of prolonged exposure. Reluctantly Harry pulled himself out of the pool and grabbed a towel to dry himself off. Noticing his sweaty clothes, Harry concentrated on a clean set of clothes and smiled. Another pair of jeans, long sleeved shirt in addition to a jumper appeared, folded neatly in a pile. Harry just shook his head and started to dress.

Once Harry had his jeans on he called for Dobby again and once again to his surprise the house elf somehow know what Harry wanted by banishing the sweaty clothes the moment he arrived. Harry thanked Dobby who nodded happily, insisting it was no problem whatsoever before vanishing. Using the towel to dry his hair, Harry unlocked the door and stepped out only to find that he wasn't alone.

Ron and Hermione were in the Room of Requirement waiting for him. Ron's eyes instantly widened as he stared at Harry, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly. Hermione looked at Harry for only a moment before she blushed and quickly looked away. This strange behavior struck Harry as odd until he realized that he hadn't put a shirt on yet. Letting out a groan, Harry quickly grabbed his shirt out of the bathroom and put it on.

"Sorry," Harry said as he re-entered the room as he put his wand holster back on. "I didn't think you two would be back so soon. How was Hogsmeade?"

"Boring," said Ron as sat down on the sofa and looked around the room. "If I would have known this would be what you were doing I would have stayed behind." He looked at Harry and grinned. "So, what have you been doing all day?"

"Being irresponsible," Lily huffed crossing her arms.

James sniggered and when she glared at him he hid his face behind the book.

Harry shrugged. He wasn't about to tell them that he had been trying to push himself hard enough for an outburst to come. *Oh yeah, I wanted to push myself to the point of exhaustion so my magic could go out of control for me to find out if I could control it.* "A little of this and a little of that," he said evenly then looked at his other best friend who still wasn't looking at him. "Hermione, is something wrong?"

Hermione quickly looked at Harry and shook her head. "Not at all," she said with a smile. "So do you feel up to helping us review some spells until dinner? Maybe we can just start with the Protego charm?"

Harry looked at Hermione with a raised eyebrow for a moment before he remembered that he had spent weeks on the charm and the different variations of it. The normal Protego charm was easy when done correctly with the right amount of concentration. It was the variations that were difficult and dangerous. The more powerful variation, the more power it drained from you. That was the reason the normal charm was the only one taught until Auror training. "What about it?" Harry asked evenly.

"Well, Viktor told me about the attack and the shield you cast to protect yourself, Hagrid and Mr. Crouch from the attacker," Hermione said eagerly. "He said that he'd never seen a shield like it before. He said it was really powerful but that you passed out from it. I guess I'm just curious with what you did to cause something like that."

Harry let out a sigh as he sat down on the sofa next to Ron. "You can alter the charm four ways: incantation, wand movement, concentration or a combination of the three. That night I used concentration," he explained. "I put too much of myself into the shield, causing me to pass out. That's why very few try to alter the charm. It can be extremely dangerous for the caster if one thing is miscalculated."

"So why take that chance?" Ron asked in confusion. "You make it sound like you could kill yourself."

Harry tilted his head backwards until it rested on the sofa. The silence was all Ron and Hermione needed to know that Ron had made an excellent point. That was the reason the variations of the Protego charm weren't touched on until NEWT classes. No one wanted to risk anyone who didn't have enough control of their magic to try it. The only reason Harry knew about it was because he had been bored one day during his time at Hogwarts before his third year started. He had been working on the charm periodically since then in case he needed a powerful shield to protect himself. It had been over two years and Harry wasn't any closer on determining what his limitations were.

"Bloody hell," Ron cursed under his breath. "Why would you ever attempt something like that, Harry? Especially for someone like Crouch? Wasn't he the one who had Sirius put in Azkaban without a trial?"

Harry quickly looked at Ron, horrified at his best friend's words. "Please tell me you didn't mean that," he begged. "I may not like the man but if I hadn't done something he could have been killed. That wasn't something I was willing to have on my conscience. You can call it stupid if you want but I'm the one who has to look at myself in the mirror every morning." Shaking his head, Harry had to look away. How do you explain what you can't put into words? "You have no idea how hard that's been since Cedric died," Harry said softly.

"Exactly! He doesn't. And you should be glad he doesn't instead of getting angry and scolding him at every turn!" Sirius said. "What?" he asked Lily who had been glaring at him. "Not everyone is born all wise like you Lily. Some of us go through a little thing called growing up and will make mistakes and say stupid things. We shouldn't get scolded for that at every turn. I mean, this is what, the second time Harry chews Ron this chapter alone. I love Harry to bits but he is not perfect."

"He got you there Lily," James smiled.

Lily actually looked embarrassed, "I don't mean to come off self-righteous. Sorry."

"It's okay Lily," Sirius said apologetically. "Sorry, I got carried away."

Hermione hurried to Harry and pulled him into a fierce embrace. "But that doesn't mean we can't be there for you Harry," she said sincerely. "We want to help you through this. We just don't know what you need." Hermione pulled back and looked into Harry's eyes for some hint of what to say or do but received nothing. Harry just stared at her for a moment before he looked away.

"Unless you don't want to talk about it," Ron quickly added. "I think Hermione and I both know you're going through a lot right now."

You have no idea, Harry mused. Looking back at his friends, Harry saw that they were both waiting for him to say something—anything. "I know I've been difficult," he said at last. "My head is such a confused mess right now. Earlier this past summer my emotions were all over the place. I put Sirius and Remus through an awful lot. I guess I'm just trying to spare you two the hassle of having to deal with me when I suddenly feel angry or depressed."

Hermione sat down on the sofa to Harry's left, facing him. "Listen Harry, you went through something traumatic," she said compassionately. "You nearly died because of it. I think we would rather have you shout at us or cry with us there to support you rather than having to face it all alone. I'm sorry if anything I said brought on any of these feelings."

Harry shook his head at her apology. "Don't worry about it, Hermione," he said. "I'm sorry I snapped at you about your Defense study group. I'll admit that Sirius and Remus have taught me a lot but I wasn't comfortable with the thought of trying to relay it on to you two. Remus had a way to just make you feel comfortable around him when he taught while Sirius tried to make everything a game, at least to him. I—I'm just not a teacher."

Hermione shifted her body to look over at Ron who shrugged his shoulders. Biting her lower lip, she returned her gaze to Harry but now there was a definite nervousness about her. It was almost like she was afraid of breaking some horrible news but that was impossible. If something had happened she would have mentioned it already, right?

"What's going on?" Harry asked cautiously.

Hermione's gaze fell as she fidgeted nervously. "Harry, I think I really messed up," she said softly. "I—I thought maybe you would come around about teaching us so I went ahead and started talking to people. A lot of people want to learn how to defend themselves, Harry, and they want to learn from you. Right now you are the only one who has any sort of training in that area. Harry, we can't just wait around and hope that someone can save us the next time something happens! Please understand!"

"She didn't?" James asked incredulously his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open.

"I'm afraid she did," Lily said biting her lips and raising her eyebrows.

Harry's eyes narrowed at Hermione for a moment before he stood up and walked towards the door. He couldn't believe Hermione went behind his back like this. Why couldn't she just take 'no' for an answer? Couldn't she understand that he *couldn't* do it? He couldn't take such a risk, right? Why should he be pulled into this because his guardians felt it best to give him a few private lessons when others did not?

"Harry please!" Hermione pleaded. "Why are you so afraid to help us?"

Turning around quickly, Harry glared at Hermione, his anger quickly rising. "How dare you!" he growled through his teeth and his hands tightened into fists. "The last time I checked it wasn't my responsibility to teach the students here how to defend themselves! You have no idea what is really going on here! How could you when you spend all of your time fighting with Umbridge? Umbridge is watching me! The moment I do anything out of line she will

inform Fudge who will declare Sirius and Remus unfit guardians! I will be taken away from the only fathers I've ever known!"

"She can't do that! Can she?" Lily asked worried.

"The way things are going I don't know," Remus shrugged looking grim.

At that moment everything that was made of glass in the room (which was only a few mirrors) shattered. Ron and Hermione quickly covered their heads defensively but quickly realized that nothing had hit them. Slowly, both of them looked at Harry who was still standing there, breathing heavily, with his fisted hands shaking in anger.

"B—but they're your guardians!" Ron protested nervously. "Dumbledore wouldn't let that happen! Mum and Dad wouldn't let that happen! The Order wouldn't let that happen!"

Hermione carefully approached Harry and rested her hands on the sides of his face, tilting it so their eyes met. "Harry, listen to me," she said gently. "I would never do anything that would jeopardize your life with Sirius and Remus. You're right. It isn't your responsibility to teach us but we weren't as fortunate as you to have guardians who were so proactive. We need this. We need to be ready, at least for our practical exam. If you don't feel comfortable with participating then that is your choice. All I'm saying is that we could really benefit from your knowledge."

"This will all be kept a complete secret, Harry," Ron added. "Hermione's thought of a few ways to make sure it stays that way. What would Sirius and Remus say if you asked them about this?"

Harry let out a sigh as his gaze fell, his anger fading quickly. He knew the answer to that question immediately. "They would want me to be involved," he admitted. Sirius of course would do anything to break the rules while Remus would insist that study groups are extremely helpful in learning.

"I'm telling you," James said shaking his head. "See? 'Study groups are extremely helpful.' Here they are planning a revolution and Moony only thinks about homework!"

"I think 'revolution' is a tad too exaggerated a word for what they are planning," Remus snorted.

"Still," Sirius nodded biting his lips and patting Remus' back. "James is right Moony. You have to layoff from the books!"

Slowly, Harry met Hermione's gaze again. "You know I hate attention," Harry said softly. "What's stopping everyone from wanting to know about...everything?"

"Nothing," Lily said bluntly.

Hermione gave Harry a soft smile as tears escaped her eyes. "Us, Harry," she said sincerely. "We will be there every step of the way. Just give it a chance. If it's too hard or if it doesn't work out then fine. At least you gave it a try, right?"

"Oh, Hermione. You're being naïve," Sirius sighed. "Like you'll be enough to stop any questions! You won't and you'll have put Harry in an impossible position because he won't be able to just get up and leave."

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. For some reason he just had a feeling that once he started he wouldn't be able to walk away. He would feel obligated to see it through 'til the end for everyone else's sakes. As much as he didn't want this, Harry knew he would hate it more if something happened to one of his friends and there had been something he could have done to prevent it, even if it had been teaching them a few spells and charms. Harry just hoped that what Hermione and Ron said were true about the measures they were taking. The last thing he needed was more trouble from the Ministry.

"Here, here," James sighed.

A/N- Hope you liked it. There was a large piece with description of Harry's training that I didn't see much point in commenting and it made it seem like I didn't do much in this chapter but I really tried. I found out by writing this at the same time of my other fic that it's harder to comment on someone else's work than coming up with your own story. Hopefully next chapter will be more filled since we have our first Umbridge detention.

Thank you all for reading and reviewing.

I don't own any of this.

Chapter 11

The Price for Lying

The following evening Harry found himself back in Room of Requirement alone. This new study group that Hermione was forming was already making him nervous forcing him to find some sort of outlet to clear his head. Not really wanting to think about anything, Harry covered his eyes with a blindfold and was attacking filled sandbags that fell from the ceiling with sais. This forced Harry to keep his head clear of everything except for the swinging sound the bags made when they came down.

"Harry James Potter! What if one of those bags falls on your head?" Lily scolded worried.

"The point is to avoid that Lily," Sirius explained. "That's the exercise."

Lily glared at him and crossed her arms, "And if he gets knocked off by one of those bags who will know he is there unconscious?"

Sirius opened his mouth then shut it. He frowned and then scolded, "Harry James Potter, you should not be there alone!"

The room seemed to understand what he wanted; throwing sandbags at him when he would least expect it. Harry moved instinctively, using the sais to attack the sandbags as if they were an enemy. Soon the floor around him was covered with sand, making it more difficult to move quickly without losing his footing. Falling to one knee, Harry ducked to avoid being hit by another sandbag that came down. He repositioned the sai in his right hand as he rolled onto his back and flipped to his feet, slashing the sandbag open as he did so. Hearing another sandbag coming to his left, Harry jumped, twisting in the air as his foot came in contact with the sandbag, sending it flying backwards. This gave Harry enough time to land firmly on his feet before quickly turning his body so he could slash the bag open the moment it was back into range.

The sound of sand falling to the ground filled his ears along with the creaks of the swinging sandbags that were nearly empty now. All of a sudden he heard a *swoosh* and knew another bag was coming right at him. Repositioning the sai in his left hand, Harry threw it at the sandbag, sending it in the opposite direction. He muttered a '*Finite*' then reached up to remove his blindfold only to stop in mid action when he suddenly had the feeling that he was being watched.

His body instantly tensed as he gripped his remaining sai tightly. No one but Ron and Hermione knew of this place except for maybe the teaching staff. *But that doesn't mean no one other than them can find it.* Instinct taking over, Harry quickly turned and threw his remaining sai at the threat as he pulled off his blindfold while turning to where he left his wand. A loud clang could be heard, alerting Harry that the sai had hit something hard. Extending his hand, Harry silently called for the piece of wood with a phoenix feather core and completed the turn facing the threat...

...and immediately let out a groan when he saw a large group of blurry students by the door, the sai he threw was embedded in the wall just over Ron's head (Ron's hair was unmistakable). *I really should have locked the door. It'll be around the entire school by morning.* Without saying a word, Harry walked over to the small table, picked up his glasses and put them on. He then grabbed his wand holster and put it on as he turned to face the crowd and looked directly at Hermione, who was looking nervous once again. "If you wanted to use the room, Hermione, you should have told me," he said evenly.

"Oh, I think Hermione got exactly what she wanted," Sirius snorted.

Hermione pulled out her wand and nervously cast a '*Finite Incantatem*'. "Well—um—you remember the group I told you about, right Harry?" she asked uncertainly. "Well, I thought that since you would be already here we could just sort out a few things...if that's okay with you."

"I don't like it. She just put Harry in a position where he can't deny teaching them because all those kids will be in awe and if he does he'll come out as the villain. It's not nice of her at all!" Remus shook his head.

Harry looked at Hermione skeptically. The fact that she needed to cancel out a spell was all the proof he needed to know Hermione had something else up her sleeve. "Really?" he asked as he holstered his wand. "That was the reason why you cast a silencing charm so I wouldn't hear you? I don't think so. How about the truth this time?"

"At least Harry isn't fooled easily," James nodded approvingly. "I think Hermione just scored some very negative points with him and it will take some major work to get back on his good side."

"It is the truth, Harry," Ron insisted. "We didn't want to distract you. You told us you were coming here to clear your head. We never thought you would be doing—er—well—what you were. What were you doing? Do you know that you nearly hit me with that—that thing?"

"Serves you right for sneaking in on him like that!" Sirius growled.

"Yes, and like Hermione had no clue he would be training? Puhlease!" Lily snorted.

"Too bad he missed," Fred muttered to George, causing several people to snicker.

Harry just shook his head and closed his eyes, concentrating on a place with enough room for everyone to sit. The sound of several gasps caused Harry to open his eyes and see that he was now in the middle of a cozy common room that strongly resembled the Gryffindor Common Room. Harry was saved from saying anything when Hermione cleared her throat.

"If everyone could take a seat we can get started," Hermione said sounding slightly nervous. Everyone moved to the armchairs and sofas, murmuring quietly to each other. Hermione moved to the center of the room while Harry moved to the back, away from everyone's gazes.

Looking around the room, Harry noticed Neville, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Ginny, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Lee Jordan, in addition to the Quidditch team from Gryffindor, Padma Patil (Parvati's twin sister), Cho with a few of her usual friends, a girl with dirty blonde, nearly waist length hair that he had seen with Ginny a few times, Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner were present from Ravenclaw, and Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott and a few others Harry didn't recognize from Hufflepuff. It seemed that Hermione had been quite busy.

Hermione stole a glance at Harry before clearing her throat. "Well, all of us are here because we want to learn how to defend ourselves properly," she began. "Regardless of whom we may believe, what happened on the train ride is proof that there is more than just one threat out there. The rubbish that Professor Umbridge is teaching us isn't what we need. We need to take matters into our own hands."

Several people nodded in agreement. "So Harry's going to teach us how to fight, right?" asked Michael Corner.

"See? What did I tell you? Pressure!" Remus cried scowling.

Harry instantly looked at Hermione with a raised eyebrow as he enfolded his arms across his chest. What in the world had she been telling everyone? He had made himself clear that he would help out if he was needed but he couldn't be the leader of this group Hermione was creating. He couldn't afford to be anything more right now.

"The problem is that those students wouldn't be there if Hermione had said she was the leader. They went because of Harry and Hermione knows it," Lily sighed shaking her head.

"Hermione is a good girl but sometimes she fails to see what's right in front of her. She is so focused on what she believes is right that she doesn't stop to think of the nuances of things," James shook his head. "I know she isn't doing this to hurt Harry but she is and she won't like his reaction but he'll be right."

"Harry is going to help us in learning spells to defend ourselves," Hermione corrected. "I wouldn't call that 'fighting'—"

"So we're not going anything like he was just doing?" asked a blond Hufflepuff boy in an annoyed voice. "What's the point of him teaching us then if we can't learn the fun stuff?"

"And you are?" Ron asked bluntly.

"Zacharias Smith," said the Hufflepuff student as he sat up straighter, "and I think we have a right to know what really happened—"

Harry inhaled sharply as several students jumped to their feet, Ron, the Gryffindor Quidditch team and Cho being among them. "No, you don't have any right," Ron said defensively. "Harry's not here to settle your curiosity, *Smith*. If you have a problem with that then you can leave."

"I agree that Harry is not there to settle their curiosity," Remus said calmly. "But I do think that Cedric's friends have the right to know what happened to him. But it should be Dumbledore who explained. I mean, Harry already did his duty telling Dumbledore. Now he should explain to the others what happened. And until he does it's normal that they will try to find out any way they can, even if they have to badger Harry to do so."

"So you're defending this Smith bloke?" James asked annoyed.

"Yes and no. I am defending his right to know what happened to his friend but I am not defending him badgering Harry," Remus tried to explain himself.

"I don't think he has to know at all!" Sirius cried.

"If it was James, wouldn't you think you have the right to know what happened to him?" Lily asked.

"It's different," Sirius said firmly.

"No, it's not. We didn't know Cedric. Maybe this Smith bloke was his best friend just like you are James'. You are looking at it from Harry's point of view. You don't want them to make Harry relive it so you are saying he doesn't have any right," Lily said. "Start looking at it from Cedric's friends' point of view. They need some closure."

Sirius huffed but nodded.

"But Cedric—"

"—was my friend," Harry interrupted Smith in a soft voice but everyone could hear the emotion he was trying to keep inside. "Those of you who knew Cedric know that he is very protective of those he cares for. Cedric and I looked out for each other during the Tournament. We didn't care who won just as long as it was someone from Hogwarts. Cedric was like an older brother I never had. Those of you who have siblings think of what it would be like to watch their murder and have no way to stop it."

Harry inhaled deeply as his eyes narrowed and Zacharias Smith. This was exactly why he didn't want to do this in the first place. "You have no right to demand anything from me," he said evenly. "I'm not here to teach you anything. I had been asked to help you since I have had the most training in this area. I can see now that this was a mistake. I'm not here to entertain you with stories of all of the horrors I've had to face in my short life. Do you honestly think I don't know what you all will do the moment you leave this room? You will tell your friends of what you've heard. You will tell them that I had to watch as Cedric was forced on his knees in front of me before he was hit with the killing curse. You will tell them that I witnessed Voldemort's—" several people flinched and gasped in surprise, "—rebirth then had to fight for my life which I nearly lost."

Both Ron and Hermione had moved to Harry's side. Ron had a protective hand on Harry's shoulder while Hermione was resting a hand on Harry's arm. "The moment Umbridge hears this she will inform the Ministry who will blame Professor Dumbledore or my guardians for spreading rumors to discredit the Ministry and create a panic. I have too much to lose to take that risk."

"Harry *is* taking a risk by helping us," Hermione added. "That is why everything that is said here stays here. Can any of you create a corporeal Patronus because you have read about it? We need to practice; we need to learn before something may happen...or we are tested...in the classroom or out in the real world. How many are you are confident enough in your skills to face a Death Eater?"

"That's harsh," Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Realistic though," James said. "There's a big chance they will have to face a Death Eater, especially the Muggle-borns, even if they are not an active part of the war. How many times haven't you heard dad's lectures: 'Keep your wand with you at all times,' 'don't go anywhere alone?' Or the times he's drilled us in charms and hexes even though we're not supposed to do them during the summer?"

"I know. But they are school kids, they are not thinking about Death Eaters. She has a better chance getting them by the OWLs and NEWTs angle," Sirius explained.

No one said a word. Harry could see that everyone was slowly starting to look at him with admiration, something he really didn't want. "Look, I know those of you from a magical background may think the physical part of my training is appealing but it was really only a last possible option," he said truthfully. "The only reason I had to rely on Martial Arts was because I had dropped my wand. Hand to hand combat puts you too close to the enemy. There is very little time to react. By keeping the distance that using wands gives you, there is a greater chance of escape."

Silence filled the room as everyone continued to stare at Harry which was starting to make the fifteen-year-old extremely uncomfortable. "Well," Fred said breaking the silence. "That answers that question. So, we're all agreed to let Harry *help* us with Defense. We need to decide on a meeting time that doesn't clash with any of our Quidditch practices."

"Well, for now I think once a week is suitable," Hermione said. "We'll let you know on the day and time. This place will be where we'll meet. I think you all can see that it is more than adequate." She reached in her bag, pulling out a quill and parchment. "We need everyone to write their name down so we know who to contact. Remember, we don't want to be spreading this around, especially to Umbridge. She is completely against any sort of practical learning."

The Gryffindors signed immediately followed by the majority of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The only ones who were hesitant were Zacharias Smith, Michael Corner and Ernie Macmillan. Ernie signed after glancing at his friend Justin who nodded encouragingly while Smith and Corner signed their names almost reluctantly. Although nothing was said it was obvious that Zacharias Smith still wasn't happy with Harry's reluctance to teach everyone how to fight.

With the meeting over, everyone slowly filtered out so not to attract attention. Harry waited patiently until it was just him with Ron and Hermione then instantly turned to her with a

narrowed stare. She had known that he didn't want attention and yet she had gathered a large group of people and arranged a meeting behind his back. It didn't matter what Hermione thought he would be doing. The fact was she had taken advantage of the situation.

"She should have talked to him first, now she's in for it," Sirius bit his lips.

Hermione flinched at Harry's gaze. "Listen Harry," she said nervously. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean—"

"—yes you did," Harry interrupted. "I am *not* a teacher! I told you that! Now everyone wants to learn what has taken me over two years to even grasp! You manipulated everyone in this room because *you* want to learn what is required to pass your OWLs! Did you really think that people wouldn't want to know what happened to Cedric if they saw me train?"

"Harry—"

Harry silenced Ron with a glare before returning his attention to Hermione. "May I remind you, Hermione, that you *need* me to help you?" he asked rhetorically. "I thought you understood my need for privacy. After four years of friendship I thought you understood me but I guess I was wrong. Who cares about what I need when it doesn't coincide with what Hermione Granger wants?"

"Hate to say it but: I told you so!" James said raising his eyebrows.

Tears were falling down Hermione's face as she fought to keep a sob from escaping her lips. It was hard to figure out if it was because she was hurt Harry would say such a thing or whether she finally realized what she had been doing. Harry knew he was probably out of line but he couldn't help it. He couldn't help feeling like he had been betrayed. His training was supposed to be a secret to avoid confrontation and to avoid Voldemort finding out about it.

"This is one messed up situation," Remus sighed. "Harry is right on both accounts, this needs to be kept a secret and Hermione should have realized that and not used it to her advantage but at the same time, it's like Sirius said, Harry can't expect Hermione and Ron to act like hardened war veterans at fifteen. He's different because of what he lived and I don't think he realizes that. He's expecting too much from them."

"The problem is, that although he is different in the sense that he knows what's at stake he also is, as my mother would put it," Lily said and here she faked a higher voice and shook her finger, "A *moody*

and angsty teenager that thinks the whole world revolves around him and woe betide who does not know everything he's thinking. She says that to my sister and me a lot."

"I'm a teenager and I don't think the world revolves around me," James pouted.

"Please James, you're the biggest egocentric prat I know," Sirius rolled his eyes. "And considering I'm one too that's saying a lot."

Ron clearly didn't know what to think as he rested a nervous hand on Harry's shoulder. "Listen Harry, I know we messed up," he said. "We should have come in first and told you so they didn't see. I know the meeting didn't go exactly as planned but I don't think anyone's going to bring it up again."

Harry shrugged off Ron's hand and stepped back so he could look at both of them. "If either of you ever try to do anything like you pulled tonight again I will never forgive you," he said through his teeth. "You have broken my trust. Good luck trying to repair it."

The four winced.

"Harsh!" Sirius whispered.

Without another word Harry left the Room of Requirement for the Gryffindor Tower. It had taken every ounce of self restraint for Harry to keep his anger under control but now, walking in the silent hallway, Harry felt like he was going to burst. He had never felt so betrayed before. Hermione had always seemed to be so sympathetic about what he was going through. He understood that she wanted to learn Defense with as much trouble as she had been causing in class. Hermione was trying to help people, that much was clear but the way she was going about it made Harry feel like he was being used.

Harry had nearly reached the Gryffindor Tower when a familiar sweet voice from behind interrupted his thoughts. "Mr. Potter, it's a little late for wandering the corridors, isn't it?" asked Professor Umbridge.

Breathing deeply, Harry quickly tried to calm himself and turn around. This was certainly the last thing he needed right now. "I was just returning from the library," Harry said evenly then glanced at his watch. "I still have a few minutes until curfew—"

"Which means she has no business asking where he was as long as he is under curfew," Sirius stated.

"And I trust Sirius to know all the rules so he can break them," Lily nodded raising her eyebrows.

"—if you were in the library then where are your books?" Professor Umbridge asked curiously.

"None of your business," James said in a singsong voice.

"I didn't find the book I was looking for," Harry said innocently, hoping against hope that Umbridge would buy the lie. "Someone else had checked it out. If you'll excuse me, Professor, I have homework to finish before classes tomorrow."

Professor Umbridge smiled widely. "Oh, I don't think so, Mr. Potter," she said. "You of all people should know that there are penalties for lying. I think a detention tomorrow at five with me is in order. I suggest you arrive on time. Now, on your way."

"Excuse me, she can't do that! She has no proof he is lying and even if he was, he is not after curfew. He has the right to be strolling the corridors without a reason if he wants to!" Sirius raged. "She's going against the rules. Right? Moony she is right?"

Remus had produced two thick tomes from the shelf in James' room and was consulting them thoroughly. Lily whispered to James, "What's that?"

"A complete guide to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's rules," and *'The teacher's guide for detentions,'* James said. "What? It's like you said, we have to know all the rules!"

Remus closed the books and nodded, "She has no grounds for this detention. This is against the rules. A teacher cannot hand out a detention without a valid reason and proof," he said raising *'The teacher's guide,'* "and a student may be outside his House before curfew without presenting a reason as long as he isn't actively breaking any rule," he pointed at *'A complete guide to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's rules,'* "which Harry wasn't."

Biting his tongue, Harry nodded and hurried to the Gryffindor Tower. Just when he thought his day couldn't get any worse he had to run into Umbridge only to be given a detention which would force him to miss Quidditch practice tomorrow. Angelina wasn't going to be happy, that was a guarantee. It was clear that Professor Umbridge was simply looking for an excuse to assign a detention, she had been ever since the first class. That was the only reason Harry didn't protest to the unjust ruling. She would have only given him more.

Entering the Gryffindor Tower, Harry noticed that the Common Room was rather full. He looked around the room and noticed that Angelina was in the far corner of the room, talking with Alicia and Katie. Figuring it was best to get it over with, Harry inhaled deeply and approached his teammates. Katie Bell was the first to notice him and smiled but Harry didn't return the gesture. He really couldn't bring himself to.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Katie asked as Alicia and Angelina turned to face him. "You're not still upset because we saw you train, are you?"

Harry looked directly at Angelina, ignoring Katie's questions. "I'm letting you know that I won't be able to attend practice tomorrow. I have detention with Professor Umbridge at five," he said automatically.

Angelina glanced at Katie and Alicia before pulling Harry to a nearby chair and encouraging him to sit down. She then knelt down in front of Harry and took hold of his hands. "What happened?" she asked gently. "How in the world did you get detention?"

"I say he should take this to McGonagall," Sirius scowled. "As his Head of House she has the power to overturn unfair detentions."

"He should," Remus said grimly. "But I have a feeling he won't."

Harry shrugged, suddenly feeling the weight of the long day catching up to him. "She found me in the halls and asked where I had been," he said in the same tone. "I lied, saying I was coming back from the library, and she gave me detention for it."

Angelina pulled Harry into an embrace as she looked up at Katie and Alicia helplessly. "I guess you weren't kidding when you said Umbridge has it in for you," she said gently. "Don't worry, Harry. I know it's not your fault." Pulling back, Angelina looked into Harry's eyes and smiled reassuringly. "You look exhausted. Perhaps you should call it a night."

Harry nodded and left for his dorm room. His brain felt like it had completely shut down leaving him to operate out of habit. He changed his clothes, cast a few silencing charms around his bed and crawled in. He was so out of it that he didn't even notice when Ron and Hermione had come up to check on him only ten minutes after he had dozed off, news of Harry's unfair detention having already spread through the entire Common Room.

Classes the following day seemed to drag by. History of Magic was unimaginably boring like always and to make matters worse, Professor Umbridge was observing Potions class, a class that was unbearable in its own right. They were continuing work on their Strengthening Solution, another potion that Harry was determined to brew correctly. He certainly didn't need to be given detention by Professor Snape in front of Professor Umbridge.

As class began, Harry fell into his routine and ignored Professor Umbridge scribbling on her clipboard as much as he could. He was so busy following the steps he had on the parchment in front of him that he didn't notice Umbridge start asking questions a half hour later. She started with Professor Snape then moved on to Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, making a point to avoid all of the Gryffindors.

"Do you think Umbridge will give Snape trouble?" Lily asked.

"The way he is chummy with Malfoy and for his part Malfoy is chummy with Fudge," Sirius snorted.

"Snape may as well be the only teacher there that has his job guaranteed."

The entire morning Harry had avoided Ron and Hermione like the plague. They had tried to corner him in the Great Hall but Harry left without saying a word. He sat with Neville in History of Magic and in Potions which seemed to bother Hermione more than Ron. She certainly didn't like it when Harry vanished after Potions in order to finish his Potions homework so he didn't have to worry about it tonight after detention, something he heard about from Neville before Divination.

It was during Divination that Harry learned of Professor Trelawney's probation due to Umbridge. Trelawney had been so distraught that she just left the class to interpret their own dreams. Parvati and Lavender were completely outraged that Professor Umbridge would do such a thing to their favorite teacher while everyone else had to silently agree with the Defense teacher but had to feel sympathetic with how hard Professor Trelawney was taking the news.

Defense class was as boring as always, reading out of the book only and no talking. Eager to have the class period pass as quickly as possible, Harry simply did as he was told. The moment class was over Harry grabbed a quick dinner before he had to hurry back to the Defense classroom for detention. He arrived at the door with five minutes to spare and knocked, not wanting Umbridge to give him another detention for being late.

"Come in," Professor Umbridge's voice called sweetly forcing Harry to open the door and face his fate.

Entering the office, Harry instantly remembered all of the times he had been in here during his third year when Remus had taught. It had been a sanctuary then but not anymore. The once conservative room had been completely transformed into what could only be described as girly. There were lacy covers and cloths covering everything, vases of flowers and once of the walls had a collection of ornamental plates, each containing a large kitten wearing a bow around its neck. The mere sight of the room made Harry want to gag.

"Okay, there is girly and there is ghastly and that is ghastly!" Lily shuddered.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," Professor Umbridge said sweetly.

"Would be if he didn't have to see your ugly muzzle," James snorted.

"Evening, Professor Umbridge," Harry replied politely.

Professor Umbridge smiled widely. "Sit down, Mr. Potter," she said pointing at the small table beside her where a piece of blank parchment was lying. Harry obliged, sitting down on the chair in front of the table and setting his schoolbag down on the floor. "Now, I think we both know how damaging lying is, Mr. Potter. You are going to be writing some lines for me with a very special quill of mine." She handed over a long and thin black quill that had an extremely sharp point. "You will write, 'I must not tell lies' until it sinks in. I suggest you get started."

"That's not too bad," Lily said relieve.

Sirius on the other hand was looking suspicious, "I don't like the sound of that '*very special quill*.'"

"What could her quill possibly do?" Lily asked.

"In my mother's hand," Sirius stated, "A lot!"

Harry watched as Umbridge sat down behind her desk and started attacking the large stack of parchment before glancing down at the quill. He noticed that there was no ink but figured that it was some sort of self inking quill so he didn't question it. Letting out a sigh, Harry placed the quill on the parchment and wrote: *I must not tell lies*.

Suddenly, searing pain erupted from the back of his right hand causing Harry to gasp. The words appeared on the parchment in red ink as the same words appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, engraved into his skin for a moment before the skin healed. His hand now looked irritated but there was no other sign of what he just saw.

"Told you," Sirius growled seething, "*A blood quill*," he spat.

"She can't do that!" Lily cried. "She can't force him to mutilate himself."

James had abandoned the book and was consulting the rule guides with Remus furiously.

"No, she can't," Remus growled pointing at a passage in "*The teacher's guide*," "No teacher may harm a student in any way. Inflicting harm to a student is punishable by suspension or termination of working contract depending on the extension of said harm and will be reported to the appropriate authorities for legal actions," he quoted. "She can be sacked and arrested for that!"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Harry let out a calming breath before he returned to his task. The sooner he finished this the better.

"NO HARRY!" James cried. "Refuse to do it! Get up and run to McGonagall with that quill before Umbridge can pretend she had nothing to do with it!"

Returning his gaze to the parchment, Harry once again wrote *I must not tell lies* and once again felt the screaming pain from the back of his hand when the words cut into his skin before the skin healed moments later. The torture continued; Harry watching as his own blood appeared on the parchment as the words kept appearing on the back on his hand. He had slowly learned to shut out the pain. It was constant now, much like it had been that summer before Sirius rescued him from the Dursleys. He had learned long ago to remain silent in order to avoid harsher punishments. That was what he had learned from his years with his relatives.

"I'm going to kill Petunia!" Lily shrieked. "Any other kid would not subject themselves to this!"

Darkness had fallen but Harry continued writing. He didn't notice that Professor Umbridge had given up grading essays and was watching him closely. Finally, she rose from her seat and approached the fifteen-year-old. He was so focused on his task that he didn't notice her standing in front of him until she pulled the quill out of his hand then took his right hand and looked at it closely.

"Don't touch my son!" James roared.

"I don't think we've learned our lesson yet, have we?" Professor Umbridge asked with a smile. "It looks like we will just have to try again tomorrow evening, same time. You may leave, Mr. Potter."

"WHAT?" were the four incredulous splutters.

Harry grabbed his school bag and left quickly for the Gryffindor Tower. His hand was throbbing in pain and he still had homework to complete. He didn't know how long he had been writing lines but it was surly after midnight which meant he would probably be up for the rest of the night. Glancing at his inflamed right hand, Harry had to wonder what had he done to deserve this treatment.

"Nothing Harry!" Remus cried. "Go tell McGonagall! Tell us! Tell someone!"

He wanted to tell someone but he knew it would only get someone in trouble. Umbridge wouldn't do anything without Fudge's approval. Sirius and Remus would probably attack Umbridge, Fudge and Dumbledore for something like this

"Too right we will!" Sirius growled. "I'll strangle her myself!"

happening which was the last thing Harry wanted to happen. He had vowed not to cause trouble this year and was going to stick to it. These detentions were nothing when compared to what happened at then end of last term. For now he would stay silent. He had to in order to protect those he loved.

The four teenagers slumped on either the floor, chair or bed defeated.

"Why? Why is he like this?" Sirius moaned.

"That's not the way to protect them Harry," James begged.

Remus had dejectedly taken out his list and added something.

A/N- Thanks for reading and reviewing. See you next week.

I don't own any of this.

Chapter 12

The Defense Association

Sitting alone in the empty Great Hall the following morning, Harry was drinking coffee like it was pumpkin juice. He had fallen asleep at half past three only to wake up two hours later with his scar and right hand throbbing in pain. With a groan of annoyance, Harry crawled out of bed and pushed away any strange feelings on impatience that were coursing through him. These strange feelings were really starting to be annoying and the constant pain was really making it difficult for Harry to think clearly.

"I never thought I'd say this but," James said in a suffering tone, "go see Madam Pomfrey."

Harry finished another cup of coffee and was finally starting to feel awake. Today was going to be another long day and with detention tonight it was going to be a late night too. Not feeling particularly social at the moment, Harry spent the remainder of the time before classes in the library then went about his routine of going from class to class, trying his hardest to pay attention to the material being covered.

Silencing Charms were practiced on bullfrogs, something that Harry had managed to accomplish within the first five minutes of practice but some others weren't as fortunate. The entire class could hear Hermione scolding Ron for not doing the charm right even with the rain pouring against the windows. It didn't help matters when Ron was given extra homework, having been one of the few who didn't complete their tasks.

Once classes for the day were over, Harry repeated yesterday's actions: grabbing a quick dinner before hurrying off to detention. Just like the night before, Harry was forced to write lines in his own blood that were engraved in the back of his hand which had stopped reverting back to normal, looking red and inflamed even after the words vanished. Harry knew it wouldn't be long until the cuts on his hand were permanent. The thought of a constant reminder of this inhumane punishment made cringe. What had he ever done to deserve this?

"Nothing," Lily huffed. "And you should tell someone. This is against the law, I'm sure."

"Yes, it is," Sirius nodded. "Blood quills have been classified as Dark Objects decades ago."

"How do you know?" James asked.

"How do you think?" Sirius shrugged. "My father had an assortment of Blood Quills. We were all drilled in what objects people can know we have and what they can't and Blood Quills are on the can't list. But I bet he got rid of the can't list as soon as I came to live with an Auror."

Darkness had just fallen when all of a sudden pain seared from the scar on his forehead causing Harry to drop the quill and grab his head. The pain this morning was nothing compared to what he was feeling now. In fact, he hadn't felt pain like this since Voldemort had awoken from his coma which couldn't be good. He didn't know how but Harry could tell that Voldemort was angry about something, really angry.

"Voldemort angry may be a good thing for us. At least we know he is not getting whatever he wants," Lily said hopefully.

Shaking his head in hopes to push away any thoughts of Voldemort, Harry grabbed the quill again and continued writing. He didn't want to know what Voldemort was feeling. He had enough on his mind without worrying about what some homicidal Dark Lord may be doing. The pain slowly dimmed to a minor ache like it usually was, leaving Harry with the biting pain from the back of his right hand but when compared to the headache he just had it wasn't anything worth complaining about.

"Yes, it is," Remus huffed.

As midnight arrived, Professor Umbridge once again checked Harry's right hand and shook her head sadly before declaring that he would need to come back tomorrow night to ensure that the message had completely soaked in. This enraged Harry. What right did Professor Umbridge have to do this? Not even Professor Snape was this cruel.

"Because Snape may be one evil git but he is not stupid," James scowled. "He would get sacked in a second if he was caught causing the students bodily harm. Unlike Umbridge he doesn't have the Minister of Magic on his side."

"Even with the Minister of Magic on her side," Remus pointed out, "I don't think Umbridge can get away with inflicting bodily harm to a student. Which means," he inhaled deeply and then bellowed; "GO TELL SOMEONE HARRY!"

Remus sighed relieved and Sirius patted his shoulder, "Feeling better Moony?"

"Much."

Leaving the office, Harry made a mental note to find out what exactly were the allowed punishments for detentions. He thought he could handle whatever Umbridge dished out but three detentions for something she had no proof of was ridiculous.

"Yes Harry, go look for those guides your father and Uncles have. I bet they are in the library," Lily nodded.

James looked sheepish, "Well," he said slowly "'A complete guide to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's rules' is but the 'The teacher's guide for detention,' we kind of borrowed from McGonagall's office."

"Does she know you borrowed it?" Lily asked with a raised eyebrow and James shook his head.

And do what about it? What could he do if he discovered that Professor Umbridge was in the wrong? He couldn't tell anyone without causing problems between the Order and the Ministry, something that the Order really couldn't afford at the present time. As much as he hated it Harry knew he would just have to deal with it for now. The Order was in this situation because of him. He wasn't going to make it worse.

"James! Stop that!" Lily cried as she and Remus took the book that James had started banging against his forehead from his hands. Remus went back to the bed with the book and patted Sirius, who was lying down and grabbing his head with his hands and shaking it in denial. Remus started reading.

The following morning Harry found himself in the same situation as the previous morning except that his scar wasn't throbbing as much as his right hand which made it difficult to finish his remaining homework during breakfast. The back of his right hand was still red and inflamed forcing Harry to pull up his sleeve over the area with his thumb sticking out of the opening below the cuff of the sleeve.

"My mother hates when I do that. She says I'll ruin my clothes," James told them. "I have a jumper that has a hole on the sleeve that is the perfect shape for my thumb to stick out and mom is always threatening to throw it away. I love that jumper."

"Very enlightening James," Sirius said straight faced. "I don't know how we survived all this time without that crucial piece of information."

James glared at him and threw a pillow at Sirius' face.

The fabric of his shirt irritated his hand but the redness was too noticeable for it to be left alone.

Buried in his schoolwork, Harry didn't even notice when his fellow Gryffindors started arriving and sitting down around him. It wasn't until Fred Weasley pulled the quill out of Harry's hand that he looked up to see his teammates looking at him with a concerned eye. Ron and Hermione weren't sitting too far away either.

"So, where were you last night, Harry?" Fred asked curiously. "No one could find you."

Harry grabbed his quill and returned to his schoolwork. "Detention with Umbridge again," he said evenly without looking up. He really didn't want to see the looks of sympathy everyone was probably giving him. He didn't want to think about the last two nights and what tonight would bring. Forgetting was his only choice right now.

"Wait a minute," George said in confusion. "You mean that you had detention for two nights because Umbridge thinks you're lying about where you were Sunday night?" When Harry didn't say anything George scowled and slammed his fist on the table. "That...that *hag*! I can't believe this! I'm going to McGonagall!"

"YES!" the four cried.

"No!" Harry said quickly in a hushed voice,

"NO!" the four cried disbelieving.

causing the Weasley twins to look at him like he had gone mad.

"I have to agree with the twins," Lily scowled.

"Involving any of the other teachers would only cause problems. I can handle this. I have enough to worry about without starting a war between Hogwarts and the Ministry because of a few unfair detentions. Umbridge may be wrong in her punishment but causing a scene would only make me look like a spoiled kid."

"Not when she is breaking the rules and the law," Remus said annoyed and scribbled something in his list mumbling; "talk to Harry about appropriate punishments."

Fred and George didn't look convinced but they nodded anyways. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ron and Hermione staring down at their plates with guilty looks on their faces. He didn't know what happened last night but apparently he was missing something because no one seemed to make an effort to talk to Ron and Hermione, not even Ron's siblings. That only happened when the twins were upset at Ron for doing something stupid.

The rest of the day passed similarly to the previous...slowly but not slow enough because before Harry knew it he was once again entering Professor Umbridge's office for detention. The third night of torture was even worse than the previous two. The back of his right hand wasn't healing anymore, allowing 'I must not tell lies' to remain etched into his flesh as blood dripped down his hand, staining the parchment.

For the third night in a row, Professor Umbridge forced him to write blood soaked lines until midnight before glancing at his hand. She smiled at Harry and released his hand gently. "There now, that out to serve as a reminder, don't you think Mr. Potter?" Umbridge asked sweetly. "I think I'll go easy on you since this is your first offense. It would be in your best interest to be truthful in the future. Lying only leads to trouble." She moved back to her desk and sat down behind it. "Use your free time wisely, Mr. Potter."

Harry held back the urge to roll his eyes in annoyance and bid goodnight. The moment he left the office, Harry hurried to the nearest bathroom to tend to his still bleeding hand. Thankfully the bathroom was empty so Harry could quickly clean the wound before bandaging it up with some bandages he conjured. He could only hope that it would be healed within a few days so no one would ever know what really happened in detention. From the way the Weasley twins acted this morning Harry figured they would be outraged to see the scarred flesh on his hand, just like Remus and Sirius would be.

"Yes they would and we would to," Sirius grunted. "And what does he think? That we won't notice the scars?"

"Maybe he is hoping that by the time the holidays come the scars will have disappeared," Lily said.

"It's a blood quill Lily," Sirius said annoyed. "They are designed to leave a scar, even if you use it only once. It's supposed to leave a reminder. It heals quickly because of the magic, so you won't go dripping blood around but it always leaves a mark. Father was quite clear on that. He even showed me the scar he has from using one to sign his nuptial contract in blood."

"In blood?" Lily asked horrified.

"That's the Black family for you," Sirius shrugged.

Sometimes Harry had to wonder what he had ever done to deserve the lengths so many people were willing to go to for him. All of his life he had wanted to be treated as everyone else was but he seriously doubted that everyone else had an entire secret organization protecting their secrets. That was probably what bothered Harry the most, the fact that Professor Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus were willing to risk so many lives to ensure his outbursts remained a secret. Was one life really worth all the trouble?

"Okay," Remus sighed tiredly. "You are not looking at this objectively. Padfoot and I are willing to do anything for you because that's our job. Dumbledore and the Order are willing to do anything for you because, even if I don't know why the bloody hell a grown and supposedly darkest and most fearsome wizard of our time is so obsessed with you, the fact is: he is. Therefore you must have something he wants and the Order will do anything to keep Voldemort away from what he wants. AND YOU'RE NOT HELPING IF YOU LET SOMEONE HURT YOU AND DON'T TELL US!"

"I think we better get Moony a Calming Draught," Sirius whispered. "He cursed and yelled again. That's very unlike him."

"I can hear you Sirius!" Remus said annoyed.

The remainder of the week passed without incident and rather quickly now that Harry didn't have to worry about any more evenings in Professor Umbridge's office. Thankfully no one noticed the way Harry had his right shirt sleeve pulled over his hand to hide his bandages. It had taken until Saturday morning before Harry's hand had healed over although the words 'I must not tell lies' could still be seen if you looked hard enough for it, not that anyone did. Why would they? No one had even asked what detention with Umbridge had entailed.

For the past few days Ron and Hermione had tried to approach Harry but seemed to be unable to think of anything to say and ended up walking away in frustration. Harry figured it was a combination of the confrontation in the Room of Requirement and the detentions he received because of it. Truthfully Harry didn't blame Ron and Hermione for the detentions. It was all Professor Umbridge's doing and somehow Harry had a feeling that this was just the beginning. He would have to be extremely careful from now on. He couldn't give Umbridge another opportunity to assign another detention.

Working on homework in the library late Saturday afternoon, Harry wasn't surprised when Ron tentatively sat down across from him and waited for Harry to acknowledge his best friend's presence. Three factors entered Harry's head as he slowly looked up. One, Ron was alone. Two, they were in the library meaning there could be no yelling back and forth. And three, everyone around them was watching.

Ron seemed to notice the last factor too as he nervously cleared his throat. "Look, I know I have no right to ask you for anything but we're going to have another meeting tonight," he said softly. "If you don't want to come, Hermione and I understand. The thing is, everyone knows something's not right with us and they've been asking about you. They want to learn from you, not Hermione. They only want to be involved in this if you're involved."

"Of course they do," James shook his head. "That was obvious from the start."

"Then you probably shouldn't make promises you can't keep," Harry said evenly as he returned to his schoolwork. "I told both of you that I would help out, not lead the entire thing. Hermione played both sides of the chess board to get the results she wanted. She's the one who needs to apologize to me and to everyone else. Sirius and Remus trained me in secret to give me an advantage because I need it. That advantage is gone if one person decides to talk about what they saw me doing. I don't think you realize that for me, this is a matter of life and death. This isn't for some trivial exam or to impress anyone. I have learned this in order to stay alive."

"Deep down they do," Lily sighed. "But Sirius is right. They are not hardened war veterans. They are kids."

Ron fidgeted nervously as he bowed his head in shame. "Hermione realizes that she messed up, Harry," he said. "Both of us know it's going to take a lot to get things back to where they were but we want to try. Hermione was planning on apologizing to everyone tonight and reiterate that you are just helping us, not leading...if you still want to, of course." Ron let out a sigh then slowly looked up at Harry, hoping for some indication of what Harry was thinking. "Harry, this past week has been horrible without you. Hermione's been in tears every night because she thinks she's lost one of her best friends."

"He is being a tad harsh," James nodded. "Hermione screwed up yes. But she did apologize and I'm sure she understood."

"So she sends you to talk to me on her behalf?" Harry countered in a hushed voice as he met Ron's pleading gaze. If Hermione was so sorry for what she had done then why hadn't she just told him?

"Maybe she's scared of Harry's reaction," Sirius nodded. "If how he reacted was anything to go by I'd be afraid to get near him again if I were her."

"I'm not going to sympathize and tell you I understand how hard this past week has been for you two because I don't. My best friends used me in order to convince others that their point of view was the right one. I don't just get over it because someone's crying about their mistakes. Both of you have to realize that this isn't a game. Voldemort is back and I'm at the top of his 'want to kill' list."

"What do you want me to say?" Ron asked helplessly. "We messed up. We didn't think. I promise that it will never happen again. Believe me, Fred, George and Ginny would never let it happen again. They have made it their mission to point out our faults for the last week."

"Exactly," Remus said. "They messed up, they already know they did and they won't do it again. Keeping on punishing them now is just cruel. They already learned their lesson."

Harry shrugged his shoulders as he started putting his schoolwork away. "I can't guarantee I'll come tonight," he said softly. "I should really wash my hands of the entire thing but unlike Hermione I keep my promises." Ron winced at the comment. "Hermione has her work cut out for her. My trust isn't given freely. When she gathers the courage to apologize herself, you both know where to find me."

Wanting to end the conversation, Harry left the library before Ron could say anything else. He really didn't know what to do anymore. His mind kept wandering back to the train ride to Hogwarts. That day he had fought for his life *alone*. The problem was he wasn't always going to be the only target. The students at Hogwarts needed to learn how to protect themselves...maybe not at the extent that Harry had but they needed to learn the basics. Yes, the basics were boring to learn but necessary in order to even attempt learning something more difficult. This was why the school needed an actual Defense teacher, not a fraud like Umbridge.

The problem was the Ministry just couldn't accept the truth.

That evening, Harry watched his classmates leave the Gryffindor Tower for the meeting in the Room of Requirement from the far corner of the room. Tonight was going to be interesting. If Ron had been telling the truth then Harry knew that several people would be angry with Hermione. He also knew he could prevent it from happening but Harry had a feeling deep down that this needed to happen. Hermione needed to learn how to deal with people. She needed to accept the consequences of her actions.

After an hour, Harry finally gave into his frustration and left for the Room of Requirement. Upon entering, Harry saw that the walls were lined with wooden bookcases. Silk cushions covered the floor instead of chairs. There was a set of shelves on the far end of the room that contained a variety of magical spying equipment. In the center of the room was the group of students that had met here a week ago. They were talking amongst themselves, paying no attention to the person who had just entered. Harry took that as a sign and sat down on one of the cushions, watching his classmates in silence. Announcing his presence would only distract everyone.

"Listen," Hermione said over the chatter, "I know you all wanted to learn from Harry but please understand from his point of view. He was given three days of detention from Umbridge already because he was protecting what we're trying to do."

"Actually I was given detention because it was the first opportunity for Umbridge to do so," Harry corrected her causing everyone to jump in surprise. "The reason she had was inconsequential. Her main motive was to have me admit that I'm lying about Voldemort's return."

Several people flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord's name causing Harry to roll his eyes in annoyance. These people wanted to learn how to fight against Voldemort and his followers yet they couldn't even hear a simple name? That certainly did nothing for his confidence in everyone. All their opponent had to do was mention Voldemort's name before striking them down.

"Little harsh there," James shook his head. "That may be a foolish fear but it's ingrained in them and in the middle of a battle I'm quite sure no one will be knocked down by a name. When you are worrying about hexes being hurled everywhere flinching will be the last of their concerns."

"Besides, no Death Eater would mention Voldemort's name. They are even more scared than other people of doing so since they actually are around Voldemort," Remus said.

"B—but that's not fair!" Cho protested.

"Welcome to the world of Professor Umbridge," Ron said sarcastically then turned to Harry, a nervous look appearing on his face. "Glad you could come, mate. We decided on a name: The Defense Association or the D.A. for short. We were currently discussing who should be the leader since—er—well—since you don't want to do it."

"You're right, I don't," Harry said evenly. "I don't think anyone should." Several people stared at Harry in confusion at the comment. Harry looked directly at Hermione. "May I?" he asked and Hermione quickly nodded. "Everyone, please separate into groups of your own house." He stood up and waited as everyone did so. "Now, as a group, select either one or two people who will be a part of a committee. This committee will be in charge of arranging the meetings. This will take off the strain from one person running the entire thing. Those of you who are a Prefect or a member of your house Quidditch team or maybe even both and feel you won't be able to handle another responsibility, make your feelings known to your group."

"That's smart," Remus nodded approvingly. "This way all the Houses are represented and they can make sure everyone gets to be listened."

Quite conversations broke out amongst the three groups. Harry watched the Gryffindor group and noticed that Ron, Fred, George, Angelina, Alicia and Katie quickly declared themselves out of consideration. He also noticed that Hermione was being unusually quiet. That was odd. He had expected Hermione to jump at the chance to be a representative. The Hufflepuff group was the first to quiet down followed by two students approaching Harry: Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbot. That wasn't much of a surprise. The next group to quiet down was the Gryffindor group. Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom approached Harry from that group. That was a surprise. Finally, the Ravenclaw group silenced with Cho Chang and Ginny's blond haired friend approaching. It seemed that the committee had been formed.

"Congratulations," Harry said to the six members. "I suggest you start with something easy today. Perhaps the Disarming Charm."

"One thing, Harry," Ginny said with a smile and a glance at Neville before returning her gaze to Harry. "We accept being members of this committee but I think all of us will agree that we also need leadership. I think you should be our supervisor. None of us can deny your knowledge in this area. It would be a shame not to use it, don't you think?"

"Have to agree with her," Sirius said. "He may not want to be the leader but since he is the more knowledgeable he can help them more."

The other five members nodded in agreement leaving Harry trapped. At least he wasn't teaching. "Fine," he said softly. "Once the meeting is over we'll talk about when and where to meet. I suppose you all want me to take over today's lesson?"

Ginny smile brightened. "Just to start off, I think," she said happily. "Once we get the hang of it we can help you out, right everyone?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. "Just give it a chance, Harry," Cho added. "Most of us learned this charm years ago so it shouldn't be too difficult. I think everyone just needs to practice it until they get it down."

Harry nodded as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. *So much for not getting involved.* "Everyone please break off into pairs," Harry announced as he straightened his glasses stepped around the committee and faced the remaining students. "We will be reviewing the Disarming Charm tonight and before you complain, remember: there is no point in learning the more advanced charms, spells and hexes if you don't have the basics down first."

For the next three-quarters of an hour everyone practiced the disarming charm on each other while Harry and Cho observed, the rest of the committee claiming that they needed the practice. Neville was partnered with one of Cho's friends and after a few reassuring words from Harry had no problem in disarming her. The entire committee watched, even if it was out of the corner of their eyes, as Harry strolled among the groups, offering his input if it was needed and congratulating others then they were successful. To Harry he was simply doing as Sirius and Remus had done when they taught him so he didn't think anything of it.

When Harry finally called a cease fire, the majority of the group was happy with their accomplishments. "All right, feel free to practice throughout the week, but not in public," he said casually. "If any one has any questions talk to any of the committee members. They will be teaching you next week. Everyone but the committee is free to go. If the time changes, you will be notified."

The six students quickly approached Harry, eagerly waiting to schedule their meeting. "That was really good, Harry," Neville said instantly. "You're a natural teacher. Once you told me how to focus it was easy. No one's ever explained it out to me before."

"I have to admit that Longbottom's got a point," said Justin with a shrug. "I think Professor Lupin was the only one to *really* explain things out. We should probably take that direction in the future. It would certainly help everyone when we reach more difficult material."

Sirius hugged Remus, "Ah, Professor Moony. Best teacher ever."

Remus blushed and patted Sirius' arm, "Okay Paddy. You may return to your seat."

"It does," Harry said more to himself than to the group but everyone heard him anyways. The comment only reinforced what Harry already believed. Remus was an excellent teacher but because he was a werewolf the Ministry wouldn't let him teach again. "Does anyone have any objections to meeting in the library tomorrow morning at nine?"

Sirius raised his hand. Lily rolled her eyes, "Yes?"

"Nine is too early," he whined. "I don't wanna get up early."

Everyone shook their head and promised to be there before leaving the Room of Requirement for their respective Towers. It was close to curfew and the last thing anyone needed was to get into trouble by Flitch, Professor Umbridge or Professor Snape. Ready to follow, Harry cast one more look around the room and saw that he wasn't alone. Hermione was sitting in the corner, crying softly. He couldn't help but let out a frustrated sigh. He really wasn't ready for a confrontation with her tonight.

Hermione seemed notice that she and Harry were alone, stood up and rushed over to him, throwing her arms around him. "Oh Harry, I'm so sorry!" she cried. "I never meant to hurt you or put you in danger. I was surprised to see what you were doing and thought...I don't know what I was thinking. Please, please forgive me! I promise that I'll never try to do anything that will put you in danger again!"

"See? What did I say? She didn't know what she was doing was so bad and now she does and won't do it again," Sirius said raising his arms and letting them fall again.

Harry awkwardly patted Hermione on the back, not sure of what else to do. Yes, he was upset with her but he knew she would think twice before even trying to do something like it again. Chances were Hermione was too excited about the group to think about the consequences. How could he blame her for that? "I forgive you, Hermione," Harry said sincerely, "but I can't forget it. It's going to take time for me to trust you again but I'm willing to make the effort."

"Good," Lily nodded approvingly.

Hermione pulled away and smiled at Harry as she brushed away her tears. "Thank you, Harry," she said gratefully. "I'm glad you came tonight and I like your idea of representatives from each house to share the load."

Harry shrugged at the comment as he walked towards the door with Hermione. "I figured it was best since there may be a time when I won't be here—"

"—w—what?" Hermione asked in shock. "What do you mean 'won't be here'? Why wouldn't you be here? Did something happen?"

"I meant that Professor Umbridge may try to give me another detention in the future," Harry clarified quietly as he walked out of the room with Hermione close behind him. "Right now she sees me as a threat since so many people want to follow in my footsteps and I clearly don't agree with the Ministry's views at the moment. I'm being attacked from both sides: the Ministry and Voldemort. That's why I need to stay out of the spotlight."

Hermione let out a sigh as they reached the staircases. "I'm really, really sorry, Harry," she said softly as they stepped onto the moving staircase. "You just seem to take on everything so calmly that we forget you must be going through. Even when you were mad at me you didn't really raise your voice. We've been through a lot but this past week, I think I've realized something. You really don't get angry anymore. I don't know when it started but I know it's been this way for a while. I realize I have no right to say anything but I—I'm concerned, Harry. It isn't right to keep everything inside."

"I'm not," Harry said as they reached the Fat Lady portrait. "I just don't feel that it's necessary to rant to people who can do nothing about what's on my mind. If I have a problem with my homework or something else concerning life here at Hogwarts then you'll hear about it." He told the Fat Lady the password and entered, leaving a startled Hermione behind. He knew it was going to take time to trust Hermione again but at least they were talking. The emotions problem was going to be slightly more difficult. Telling his friends that he couldn't get angry wasn't an option. He just hoped that he could think of something believable if the matter ever came up again.

"The problem is that Hermione is right," James sighed. "Maybe if Harry wasn't bottling everything up he wouldn't have reacted the way he did. Yes Hermione made a mistake but Harry was kind of out of line

with the punishment. Maybe if he had ranted about the injustice of things and gotten angry at stuff he wouldn't have taken it so badly. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Remus said. "He was frustrated with a bunch of things but couldn't get them out. Then something else happened that wasn't necessarily the end of the world but he treated as it because he was pouring all his frustrations about everything else in it. It's not healthy but Harry has to realize it himself."

The following morning Harry was in the library an hour before he was supposed to meet with the committee trying to finish his essay for Potions. He had once again had dreamed about the windowless corridor that was starting to drive him mad. He hated the dream but he just couldn't seem to get it out of his head. Why? What was so important about some empty corridor? He had never even seen such a place before, at least not that he could recall.

Cho and the blond haired Ravenclaw, who introduced herself as Luna Lovegood, were the first to arrive nearly twenty minutes before nine. Luna instantly stuck her wand behind her ear before pulling out an issue of a magazine called 'The Quibbler', turning it upside down to read it. Harry glanced at Cho with a raised eyebrow but only received a shrug as an answer.

The four exchanged glances and all tried to muffle their laughter as if Luna could see them.

Harry had heard about 'The Quibbler' from Sirius and Remus. Apparently it was similar to the tabloids, printing mostly fiction and rarely fact. He didn't know much more than that since Sirius and Remus had such resentment against reporters, especially Rita Skeeter who had been surprisingly quiet as of late. You can only ridicule Dumbledore and the Ministry for so long.

Ginny and Neville were the next to arrive. Neville sat down next to Harry while Ginny sat down next to Luna. Justin and Hannah arrived a short time later and after casting a few silencing charms, they were ready to begin. After introductions, Cho, Justin and Hannah immediately jumped in on material that should be covered at the next meeting. Simple spells, charms and curses were agreed upon along with who would cover what. Saturday night was decided to be the next meeting time leaving the representatives would have plenty of time to prepare.

Harry quickly discovered that Luna Lovegood was a rather strange person. She had a tendency to offer comments that made very little logical sense and didn't seem to mind the

odd looks she was getting from everyone else. Harry made a mental note to ask Ginny about Luna later. He didn't know if Luna was just trying to be funny or if she just wasn't entirely there.

"At least she is clearly happy with herself if she doesn't care what others think," Lily said. "Wish I could be like that."

With everything decided, the meeting ended leaving Harry alone once again to tackle his Potions homework. At least some things never changed. No matter what was going on, there was always Potions homework.

"Yes, we can always trust Snivellus to be a constant pain in our lives," Sirius said in a suffering tone.

A/N-Rasa Rainboweyes wrote a fic answering to my "Remus comes back from the dead" Challenge. It's called "Him". You can find it in my favorites or in my C2. The story id is 3951654. Check it out.

Thanks for reviewing.

Happy holidays everyone! See you next week!

Still not mine.

Chapter 13

The Price of Fame

"I didn't like the price of lying and I'm sure I won't like the price of fame," James frowned crossing his arms.

Over the next two weeks the D.A. slowly morphed into an exciting learning experience. The representatives or 'Council' as they were now called quickly learned how to act as a team and play off of each other's strengths. The biggest surprise was Neville who once he got over his nervousness had no problem demonstrating. D.A. meetings were on Saturday nights with Council meetings the following morning. There was also another Council meeting Wednesday night in the Room of Requirement to run through everything and make sure every single member of the Council could perform the charms, spells and jinxes they would be covering.

During D.A. meetings Harry would simply observe, throwing the occasional comment in only when he needed to. Using Remus' style of teaching had certainly paid off. Every single member of the D.A. was making progress and feeling better that they were preparing themselves as quickly as they could. So far no one had any idea of the D.A.'s existence which allowed the regularly scheduled times to remain.

"What's up Padfoot?" James asked Sirius who had his arms crossed and was managing to pout and glare at the same time.

"Why is Moony's style such a hit? What about *me*?" he whined and the others rolled their eyes.

With D.A. meetings, almost nightly Quidditch practices and homework, Harry was lucky if he got five hours of sleep at night. The first Quidditch match of the season was Saturday and with Gryffindor versus Slytherin, the entire school was eager to see the game. The problem now was that in addition to Professor Umbridge and Professor Snape, Harry had to worry about running into any Slytherins who would try to hex him since he had never lost to Malfoy, the Slytherin Seeker.

Ron was performing better as a Keeper but he still had a long ways to go. He had a tendency to become frustrated after missing a goal causing him to miss more. The entire team had tried to convince Ron that he needed to focus on the present and not the past but it only worked until he missed another Quaffle. Harry had a feeling that the sooner he caught the Snitch on Saturday the better off Ron would be.

With the arrival of the first week of November, the howling winds turned bitterly cold forcing many to cover up every exposed skin they may have. The morning of the match Ron was up at the same time as Harry for once. They ate what little breakfast they could swallow in silence. The Great Hall was filling earlier than usual, many wishing the Gryffindor Quidditch team good luck which only increased Ron's nervousness. Ron's hands were visibly shaking so much that Harry had to grab Ron's shoulder in an attempt to calm him down...

...and was overcome with such an overwhelming force of anxiety that made his head pound.

Remus bit his lips and said slowly, "I hate to say it but it sounds like-"

"Then don't say it!" James glared at him.

"But James," Lily said cautiously. "Remus is right. I mean Harry touched Ron and felt-"

"MY SON IS NOT AN EMPATH!"

"Denial will get you nowhere James," Sirius shook his head.

Harry quickly released Ron's shoulder as he shook his head, trying to push away the strange feeling that was quickly leaving. Where had that come from? Rubbing his still aching forehead, Harry glanced over at Ron whose hands were no longer shaking. Whatever that had been Harry was certain he never wanted to do it again.

"Don't worry, you won't," James said fiercely and glared at whoever tried to open their mouths.

It wasn't long before Angelina called the Gryffindor Quidditch team to head to the pitch. Hermione wished them both luck by kissing them on the cheek, something that seemed to snap Ron out of his daze. The shock of what had just transpired seemed to vanish any nervousness he had on their way to the pitch. They changed quickly then met for the pre-match talk. That was when Harry and Ron learned that Crabbe and Goyle were the new Beaters for the Slytherin team. Today was certainly going to be interesting.

"You mean dangerous," Lily snorted.

The Gryffindor team stepped out onto the pitch and was welcomed with deafening cheers and whistles. The Slytherin team was already waiting for them; the Captain, Montague, was massively overweight with Crabbe and Goyle flanking him. Malfoy was standing off to the side, with a smirk on his face as he stared at Harry. Oh yeah, this was one game Harry couldn't wait to get over with.

"What is he up too?" Sirius asked narrowing his eyes.

"Captains, shake hands!" shouted Madam Hooch, the referee. Everyone waited as Angelina and Montague approached the center of the pitch and shook hands. "Mount your broom!" Madam Hooch announced then put her whistle in her mouth and blew.

Everyone shot up in the air as the balls were released. Harry instantly started looking for the small glint of gold, dodging a Bludger as he soared higher. He couldn't worry about what anyone else was doing or what anyone was saying. Becoming distracted could cost him the Snitch. He started roaming around the pitch and nearly collided with both Bludgers that had been hit in his direction.

"HARRY! PAY ATTENTION ON THE REST OF THE GAME TOO!" Lily cried.

"Where the hell were Fred and George?" James roared.

Harry quickly dived to avoid being hit, pulling up just a few feet from the ground before coming to a halt at the Slytherin goal posts. He started looking for the Snitch again but it wasn't long before he heard the whistling noise of one of the Bludgers coming directly at him again.

"That's persecution!" Remus protested.

Pulling up, Harry shot up, high above the pitch only having to take off as quickly as possible when the other Bludger came at high speed directly at him. It was clear now that Crabbe and Goyle were trying to take him out of the game. Diving again, Harry flew past both Crabbe and Goyle, making them nearly fall off their brooms. He pulled out of his dive and found himself face to face with Malfoy.

"What's the matter, Potter?" Malfoy sneered. "Too busy showing off to look for the Snitch?"

"At least I don't need others to distract my opponent so I can catch the Snitch," Harry shot back as he looked around for the Snitch.

"Yeah! Why don't you play fair?" Lily growled.

"Because he is a Malfoy," Sirius offered.

"When are you going to stop relying on others to do things for you, Malfoy?"

"Never," James grunted.

Not wanting to wait around for a retort, Harry took off towards the Gryffindor goal posts, rising high in the air so he would be prepared for anything.

It wasn't long before Harry was once again the target of two Bludgers forcing him to dive and maneuver among the other players. Pulling up again Harry looked towards the Slytherin goal posts and nearly cried out when he saw the tiny golden Snitch fluttering a few feet about the ground. He didn't even bother looking around for Malfoy before sharply diving at a forty-five degree angle. Nothing happening around him seemed to matter. He was nearly there when the Snitch took off towards the other side of the field, forcing Harry to turn sharply in order to follow it.

It was then that Harry noticed that Malfoy was right on his tail. Leaning forward on the broom to dampen the wind resistance, Harry took off as fast as he could, pushing his Firebolt to the limit. He could feel Malfoy trying to grab hold of his broom in an act of desperation. Dropping a few feet, Harry reached out for the Snitch, stretching as much as he could and felt his fingers wrap around the tiny, struggling ball.

"YES!" James punched the air.

"Take that Malfoy!" Sirius cried.

Harry instantly let out a sigh of relief as he pulled upwards, holding the still struggling ball in his hand for everyone to see. Glancing at the score, Harry saw the final score: Gryffindor 200, Slytherin 40. He could only hope that Ron wouldn't take missing those four goals too hard or it was certainly going to be an extremely long day.

WHAM!

"What was that?" James asked worried.

A Bludger hit Harry right in the small of his back, causing him to fly forward off of his broom as pain shot through his entire back. Before Harry could even register what happened something slammed into his left side, causing bones to break with sickening cracks and sending pain throughout his upper body. It was impossible to think, impossible to breathe. Harry couldn't even bring himself to move and slammed into the ground, face down, sending more pain throughout his chest.

"They are trying to kill my baby!" Lily cried.

Silence filled the air as everyone seemed to be waiting for Harry to move but he remained still. Madam Hooch's whistle rang through the air, snapping everyone out of their daze. The crowd was in an uproar as the Gryffindor Quidditch team hurried to Harry's side. Harry felt hands carefully turn him over onto his back, the simple movement drowning him with pain. He felt like he was trapped in his own body, unable to do anything, even breathe.

"He's not breathing!" shouted George then gently slapped Harry's face. "C'mon Harry, snap out of it. Breathe, blink...do something!"

"He's not breathing!" James cried shaking Sirius. "Do something people! Don't just stand there!"

"All of you out of the way!" ordered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," Remus cried. "GET OUT OF THE WAY!"

Two familiar faces came into Harry's line of sight as his chest started to burn from lack of oxygen. Harry could feel a tear escape his right eye at the worried looks his guardians were giving him. He had been so caught up in Ron's nervousness that he had completely forgotten that they were coming to the match. How could he have forgotten about Sirius and Remus?

"It's understandable," Sirius soothed. "You were preoccupied. Now BREATHE!"

"We need to get him to Poppy," Remus said to Sirius as he conjured a stretcher. "Remember the last time he couldn't breathe."

"No, I don't think I want to Moony, thank you very much," Lily whimpered.

Sirius jumped to his feet and levitated Harry onto the stretcher. Harry was then hurried back to the castle, Sirius only stopping for a moment to warn Professor Dumbledore and Madam Hooch that something had to be done to punish the Slytherin players responsible for what happened. That was the last thing Harry heard before he passed out.

"Don't worry," James said confidently. "Padfoot and Moony will make everything better."

Loud voices quickly pulled Harry out of his painless slumber. His back felt stiff and his left side was aching. After a moment Harry remembered why he was in pain and was grateful that at least it wasn't anything like it had been before. He could breathe without any effort which

was definitely a plus. Too tired to open his eyes, Harry could only listen to the voices around him.

"Don't you dare try to wiggle out of this, Snape!" Sirius spat angrily. "Those students of yours deliberately attacked Harry after the end of the match! They should be suspended at the very least! They could have killed him!"

"They should be arrested!" Lily cried outraged.

"Hem, hem," Professor Umbridge said, sounding like she was attempting to clear her throat.

"Mr. Black, this is a first offense—"

"WHAT?" Remus cried. "Shut up old hag! I don't care if this was the only offense in their life; they tried to kill him!"

"—NO IT'S NOT!" Ron shouted. "MALFOY AND HIS FRIENDS HAVE BEEN AFTER HARRY EVER SINCE WE GOT HERE! THIS IS THE SECOND TIME THEY WENT OUT OF THEIR WAY TO ATTACK HIM!" Ron let out a sigh as he sat down at Harry's bedside. "Harry didn't want to cause problems so he didn't say anything. That was why we had Madam Hooch supervising our practices. We were trying to protect Harry."

"Well done Ron," James nodded approvingly. "Tell them!"

"Mr. Weasley, when was this attack?" asked a stern Professor McGonagall.

"The first Saturday of the term," Ron said softly. "Harry had been grounded by Madam Pomfrey so he was watching us practice. All we knew was that Harry was watching us one minute and the next he was gone. We thought something happened so the team went looking for him. We found him cornered in the changing room by Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode. Malfoy was taunting Harry about his parents, Sirius and Remus. They had their wands pointed at him, Professor. They were going to hurt him."

"Yes they were. And they should be expelled!" Lily hissed.

"I find it extremely convenient that you bring this matter up now, Mr. Weasley," Professor Umbridge countered. "It seems to me that you simply want to cause trouble for a handful of students. There is no proof—"

The four teens stared at the book shocked and Remus spluttered, "She cannot be serious!"

"Umbridge, SHUT UP!" Sirius shouted.

"Yes, thank you Sirius!" James cried but Remus and Lily winced. One thing was to tell a book to shut up, another completely different was to really tell a Ministry official who wants to make their life hell to do it.

"Why are you even here? This matter had nothing to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts. It seems to me that you are doing everything in your power to protect Draco Malfoy. Why is that?"

"Because her beloved Fudge is in Lucius Malfoy's pocket," Sirius offered his older self.

"Now, now, Sirius," Remus warned calmly.

The four teens grinned evilly. Nothing better than false calm Remus.

"I'm sure *Professor* Umbridge didn't mean to sound biased.

Snorts were heard.

I mean, she knows the trouble Lucius Malfoy can cause when his precious son is mistreated, even if it is only in young Draco's mind. Of course, that is nothing compared to the trouble you, Sirius, can cause for what happened today but none of us want to cause trouble now, do we?

"Nooo," James said innocently. "We just want justice to be seen. Malfoy being expelled and Umbridge being sacked. Just that."

I seem to remember that when I was a teacher here an offense to this degree would warrant suspension from the Quidditch team and removal of one's Prefect status. It doesn't matter who Draco Malfoy's father is or who Harry Potter is. What matters is that a student was attacked today after the game had ended with intent to cause physical harm and according to Ron, this isn't the first attempt. I'm sure we could gain access to a Pensieve and view Harry's memories so there is no doubt that the first event did indeed happen. Wouldn't you agree, *Professor?*"

Lily hugged Remus and said, "Gotta love your wicked ways Moony."

A tense silence filled the room. No one missed the underlying threat Remus had just issued. If something wasn't done, Sirius and Remus would do whatever they could to ensure Harry's

safety, just like any parent would. It was a threat that Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape were quite familiar with by now. It was also one Professor Umbridge didn't like in the slightest.

"Too bad for her, because I won't be budging an inch," Sirius growled.

"Severus, what happened today was unacceptable," Professor Dumbledore said firmly. "I am sorry but action needs to be taken to ensure something like this doesn't happen again, to any student. We can investigate the other attack further. Vincent Crabbe shall have to be suspended indefinitely for his actions. As far as Draco is concerned, he may choose whether to lose his Prefect Badge or his position on the Quidditch team and is once again on probation. I will send a letter to Vincent and Draco's parents notifying them of their inexcusable behavior. If they have a problem with their punishment then I will deal with them myself."

"Excuse me," James said. "Did he just say Malfoy had a choice?"

"Yes," Sirius scowled.

"Any other student wouldn't have had. They would have lost both in a second. Why the bloody hell does Malfoy get to *choose*?" James cried.

"Because Dumbledore doesn't want to let this pass but also can't afford the trouble that Malfoy Sr. and Umbridge would cause," Lily said grimly.

There was no room for argument so no one bothered to try. Regardless of Professor Umbridge's position, Professor Dumbledore had the final say in any decisions. "Oh, and one more thing, Severus," Professor Dumbledore added. "You will inform your students that what is happening to Vincent and Draco is the result of their own actions. They are not to take their frustration out on Harry or any other Gryffindor.

"Oh yes, that is so happening," Sirius snorted.

Minerva, you will tell your students that they are not allowed to avenge Harry in any way. It would not do well to have two houses at each other's throats because of the poor choices a few have made."

The only thing that could be heard was several footsteps walking out of the hospital wing followed by one walking in. The individual walked directly to Harry's bed and started checking him over alerting Harry that it had been Madam Pomfrey who had entered. He felt her lift his shirt up and start to poke at his aching left side causing him to release a moan of pain.

"I think another pain relieving potion is in order," Madam Pomfrey said softly. "Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, you may visit Mr. Potter later. He needs rest now." She hurried off before Ron and Hermione could even try to object.

Ron and Hermione left as Madam Pomfrey returned. Harry was on the verge of sleep when his upper body was lifted so the ill tasting potion could be poured down his throat. Even though Harry was partially awake he was still caught off guard by the potion in his mouth and started to gag. A hand gently massaged his throat and the liquid went down. That was the last thing he knew before he succumbed to darkness.

The next time Harry woke darkness had fallen outside. Opening his eyes, Harry immediately picked out the blurry figures of Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore through the dim lighting, sitting nearby and talking quietly. At the moment Harry was too content in his warm bed to move or to let the three adults know he was awake. Right now his mind was too overloaded with everything that had happened. He didn't know what was worse: the fact that everyone knew about the first attack or that Malfoy was being punished for his poor sportsmanship. No matter what any of the teachers said, Harry knew Malfoy would want revenge for his punishment.

"How long do you think we have until Fudge steps in and declares another decree about issuing punishments?" Remus asked softly.

"A second," Lily said grimly.

"Tomorrow morning," Professor Dumbledore said casually.

"Dumbledore is very optimistic," Remus said.

"It was bound to happen, Remus. Fortunately for us Dolores won't be able to overturn to decision made today and before you ask I do not regret standing up for Harry. Draco Malfoy is out of control. If something hadn't been done matters would only worsen. Harry has enough to worry about beyond the walls of the castle without having to worry from attacks within."

"I can't believe Harry didn't tell us about the first attack," Sirius muttered bitterly. "I thought Harry trusted us."

"He does," Sirius said tiredly. "But Harry has some very messed up ideas. It was unavoidable, I mean," he sighed theatrically, "There's only so much where Lily's brains can overcome James'. Poor kid," he finished shaking his head and was assaulted by flying pillows.

"It wasn't about trust, Sirius," Remus said calmly. "What would you have done if Harry told you?"

"He would have thundered towards Hogwarts," Remus said.

"Kicked down the doors to the Entrance Hall," Lily continued.

"And strangled Malfoy in the middle of the Great Hall during dinner," James finished and the disturbing thing was that Sirius nodded all the while.

"I would have made sure something was done about it," Sirius said like it was obvious.

"Dumbledore has a point. Harry has enough to worry about as it is. He shouldn't have to worry about the Slytherins attacking him whenever they feel like it."

"That was why I didn't tell you," Harry said softly. "It would only cause more problems."

Sirius and Remus hurried to Harry's side with relieved smiles on their faces. Remus gently slid Harry's glasses on allowing the teen to see everything clearly. Both of the Marauders looked exhausted which made Harry feel guilty for worrying them. Why couldn't anything ever be simple? Why did Ron have to open his big mouth? The last thing Harry wanted was for Sirius and Remus to worry about him.

"See? What did I say?" Sirius moaned desperately.

Before Harry could say anything he found himself pulled in to a tight embrace by Sirius.

"Don't you even start feeling guilty, Pronglet," Sirius said softly. "No matter what you're thinking, it's not your fault. You never have to hide anything from us, Harry. We're supposed to be protecting you, not the other way around. You know that, right?"

Harry couldn't do anything but nod. His face was buried in Sirius' chest, muffling anything Harry would even try to say. He sincerely wished that he didn't have to keep anything from his guardians. He wanted to tell them about Professor Umbridge but if Sirius found out about

the detentions he would act like he did today. Sirius would demand for something to be done which would cause even more problems between Professor Dumbledore and the Ministry, right?

"Wait just a second here," James said raising his hands. "Didn't Madam Pomfrey see his hand when she treated him?"

"I guess the injury was already healed," Remus said.

"But the scar was there," Lily pointed out. "How did she miss a new scar on Harry? Hey Madam Pomfrey; what do you think you're doing?" she cried annoyed putting her hands on her hips.

Sirius gently lowered Harry back down on the bed and pulled up a chair. "You've had quite a few visitors throughout the day, Pronglet," he said with a smile. "It seemed that several people were rather disappointed to learn you wouldn't be released until the morning."

It took Harry a moment to realize that tonight had been a D.A. meeting. He couldn't help but groan at the thought of having a Council meeting early in the morning. He had a feeling that the next D.A. meeting wasn't going to be a high priority on the list of things the other Council members wanted to cover. "So how angry is Professor Snape?" Harry asked breaking the silence.

"Well he can stuff it if he's angry," Sirius growled crossing his arms.

That certainly wasn't what Sirius had been expecting. "How do you know Snape's upset?" he asked.

"No one can sleep through your yelling, Sirius," Harry said honestly as he closed his eyes.

"Oh, and telling Professor Umbridge to shut up...probably wasn't the smartest thing to do."

"Have to agree with him," Lily said raising her eyebrow to Sirius who just shrugged.

"He has a point about the yelling, Sirius," Remus added, "but I'm not so sure about Umbridge. She was interfering in a matter that didn't concern her."

"When isn't she," Remus snorted.

"As far as Professor Snape is concerned, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "He is aware that only his students are to blame. I think even Professor Snape will admit that Draco

is out of control. He has physically attacked you twice and according to Ron attempted to attack you once more. I wish you would have said something."

Harry shook his head slowly. "It would only have caused more problems," he said softly. "I was trying to prevent a war between the houses." He could feel sleep over taking him again. Why was he so tired all of a sudden? He had slept through most of the day! "It wasn't what she wanted," Harry mumbled.

"Who, Harry?" Remus asked curiously. "Who are you talking about?"

Harry was already asleep.

"Who the bloody hell is she?" James asked.

"Dunno," Lily shrugged confused.

When dawn arrived, Harry was allowed to leave the hospital wing by Madam Pomfrey after being advised to take it easy for the next few days. His left side was still a little tender. Sirius and Remus had left after a stern lecture from Sirius about keeping secrets why Remus tried to play mediator. In the end, Harry promised his guardians that he would say something if Malfoy or any other Slytherin caused any more trouble.

Remus sighed and hid his face in his hands, "I don't think Harry understood the meaning of what Sirius said."

"Oh, he understood all right," Lily huffed. "He just side stepped it."

After a quick change of clothes, Harry hurried off to the library for the Council meeting. He found the six members of the Council at the normal meeting place, deep in the library. To say that everyone was surprised to see Harry would be an understatement. Cho and Ginny hurried to Harry, pulling him into a group hug. Everyone else greeted Harry warmly, asking him how he was feeling and congratulating him for beating Slytherin. Soon enough they had jumped back into going over what had been covered last night and what would be covered next week.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Harry left with Neville and Ginny for the Gryffindor Tower. Both Gryffindors immediately informed Harry on everything he missed, including Crabbe's suspension from the Quidditch team, Professor McGonagall's lecture of the Gryffindor House, Professor Dumbledore speech to all houses last night a dinner along with Malfoy's probation

and removal from the Slytherin Quidditch team. This didn't really surprise Harry. Malfoy could cause more damage as a Prefect than a Seeker.

Dumbledore's speech to the entire school last night was a surprise. According to Neville, Professor Dumbledore declared that any feuding between and even within houses would not be tolerated. Both Neville and Ginny had revealed that quite a few Gryffindors had wanted to avenge Harry, feeling that the punishment given to Malfoy was too lenient, and were now frustrated that they couldn't do anything because of the announcement. The Gryffindors felt that it was their right to defend one of their own.

Harry didn't know what to think about the entire mess. He was touched that people cared but was still uneasy about Malfoy being punished. Malfoy's group had never been one to follow the rules. They were just discrete about how they broke them. Harry had a strong feeling that wasn't about to change just because Professor Dumbledore gave everyone a warning.

"But Malfoy had to be punished," Sirius said. "Or else he would just escalate because he thinks he's untouchable."

Lily was about to comment and James cut her off, "We get punished all the time Lily. I already told you and we would never injure someone like that. But maybe if we had never been punished, if everything we did was met by a pat in the head like Malfoy we would be just like him now because we thought we had the right to do it. I'm not excusing Malfoy, I'm just saying that no one is helping him either by letting him run loose."

Entering the Gryffindor Tower, Harry found himself bombarded with voices of sympathy and congratulations. Questions of Harry's recovery were mixed with praise for causing the Slytherin team to lose two members. Much to Harry's relief, Ron and Hermione pulled him away from the crowd and up to the empty fifth year boy's dormitory. Ron closed the door behind them and locked it while Hermione cast a few silencing charms.

"Hagrid's back, Harry," Hermione said urgently. "We saw him last night. He's in rough shape. He looks like he's been fighting giants."

"Maybe he has," Remus said worried.

Harry instantly tensed. The thought of something happening to Hagrid had never crossed his mind. "But he's okay, right?" Harry asked nervously. "He would have told me if something went wrong. The last thing I heard was that he was delayed. How bad is he?"

Ron and Hermione looked at each other in surprise before returning their gaze back to Harry.
"You've been in contact with Hagrid?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded as he sat down on the nearest bed which happened to be Dean's. "He felt guilty that he couldn't be around when I had...well, almost died," he said uncomfortably. "He would send an owl every few weeks, asking how I was doing and what trouble Sirius and Remus were causing. He never told me what he was doing so I didn't ask. You know Hagrid. He can't keep a secret if his life depended on it."

"That's true," Lily smiled. Then her smile faltered and turned into a frown. "Hum, Moony, why the long face?"

"What kind of trouble Sirius *and Remus* are causing. I do not cause trouble! I am lured into trouble, because of my naïve personality, by Sirius and James!"

"Of course you don't," Lily agreed. "Harry, Moony is not a trouble maker!" she scolded.

Sirius and James were opening and closing their mouths and gesturing like crazy. "See? See?" James cried desperately, "That's how he weasels out of detention with McGonagall. With that," he made a disgusted face, "*innocent* expression."

"So unfair," Sirius sighed crossing his arms, "And we get the bad reputation. Since when has Moony been *naïve*?"

Remus looked at them and shook his head saying with a straight face, "See, what I am talking about? They even try to convince people I am guilty of mischief."

"I know," Lily nodded and James flopped himself on the floor incredulously.

Ron suddenly looked away while Hermione sat down next to Harry. "We noticed," she said under her breath. "Hagrid told us that he was in the mountains trying to convince the giants to join our side. Evidently it didn't go to well. First there was some sort of revolt among the giants then Death Eaters arrived. I think Hagrid didn't want to worry you so he didn't go into detail about what was going on...just like you haven't told him about what's been going on."

Harry instantly turned to Hermione, eyes wide. There was so much Harry hadn't told Hagrid because of the fact that Hagrid would immediately abandon his mission to be at Harry's side if

he knew something was wrong. The half-giant was extremely protective of those he cared about. "What did you tell him?" Harry asked nervously.

James smiled fondly, "Hagrid is a good fellow."

Hermione glanced at Ron anxiously. She was still trying to repair her friendship with Harry and appeared worried that she had endangered what progress they had made. "Well, Hagrid wanted to know why you weren't with us," she said as she returned her attention to Harry. "We had to tell him about the Quidditch game. Hagrid didn't understand why Malfoy had acted that way so we told him that this wasn't the first time that Malfoy had attacked you this year. Then Hagrid wanted to know why you were grounded from practice so we had to tell him about the attack on the train."

"He was really angry about that, Harry," Ron added. "I've never seen him so angry. We calmed him down then Umbridge came and started questioning him about where he had been. Luckily we—er—we had your cloak so she didn't see us. She really doesn't like Hagrid. I don't think it helped when Hagrid really couldn't explain his injuries to her."

"Why should he?" James said angry.

"He doesn't have to but Umbridge has been butting her nose everywhere it doesn't belong since she got there," Remus said. "And it doesn't help that she is against half-breeds and Hagrid is half-giant. He'll be on her 'to sack' list."

Harry kept shifting his gaze between Ron and Hermione as he worked out everything they just said. He had figured Hagrid would find about everything else sooner or later anyways, most likely from Professor Dumbledore. "So you didn't tell Hagrid about my heart condition, right?" he asked carefully. Ron and Hermione shook their heads allowing Harry to let out a sigh of relief. At least an angry Hagrid wouldn't corner him any time soon. "In regards to Umbridge, I don't think she likes any of the teachers here since they're loyal to Professor Dumbledore."

"True but Hagrid doesn't realize how much trouble Umbridge can cause," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Hagrid doesn't realize how much things have changed this year. If he brings out a dangerous creature for class..."

"He's done," Lily said in a matter of fact way.

"I get it," Harry said as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "Umbridge could declare him unfit to teach. I trust you warned him?" Hermione nodded. "Then you've done everything you can." Hermione moved to object. "Hermione, you can't force someone, especially an adult, to believe something if they don't want to. I don't want Hagrid to get in trouble either but nagging him isn't going to solve anything."

Hermione let out an annoyed huff and scowled. "Well if you're going to use logic," she muttered making Harry and Ron laugh. That was certainly the last thing they had expected to hear Hermione say since she had always been the logical thinker of the group. It was clear that she wanted to argue but knew that Harry indeed had a point. She couldn't force people to believe what she wanted, no matter if it was the truth or not. Sometimes people just needed to make the mistakes and learn from them.

"Yes," James said annoyed. "And Harry has been making a huge one that I hope he realizes soon," he finished tapping his hand meaningfully.

A/N- Thank you for your lovely reviews.

Happy New Year!

Don't own any of this.

Chapter 14

Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four

"Which says Umbridge is the only one that can issue punishments and Draco Malfoy is exempt of any punishment whatsoever even if he goes on a killing spree in the middle of breakfast, and Harry will get detention for breathing," Sirius said annoyed.

Hagrid's teaching abilities would be tested the following Tuesday in Care of Magical Creatures class. Ron and Hermione were right. He did look like he had been in a fight with giants. His left eye was swollen shut, cuts covered his face and hands that appeared to only have begun

healing and he was moving a little on the stiff side, alerting Harry that there were additional injuries under the surface.

The moment Hagrid, who was waiting for everyone at the edge of the Forest with a dead animal that somewhat resembled a cow over his shoulder, saw Harry he smiled brightly and waved. Harry waved back trying desperately not to let his apprehension show. He really didn't want to know what they could be learning about today that would require the presence of such a large dead animal to serve as a bargaining chip.

"It's probably to lure the animal and not a bargaining chip. Hagrid may like dangerous animals but I don't think he would deliberately take them to some creature that would attack them," Remus said.

"I don't know. There's a rumor saying Hagrid raises werewolf cubs under his bed," Sirius smirked at Remus. "Do you think he hides Harry under his bed?"

Remus shoved Sirius and hit him with a pillow.

As soon as the entire class had arrived, Hagrid could hardly hold back his excitement. "Today we'll be workin' in the Forest!" he announced. "They prefer the dark an' it's a bit more sheltered! I've bin savin' this trip inter the Forest fer this year. We're seein' these creatures in their natural habitat. Just so yeh all know, what we're studyin' today is really rare. I'm probably the on'y person in Britain who's managed ter train these creatures. Stay close and follow me!"

Several students didn't bother hiding their nervousness as they followed Hagrid into the forest, Malfoy being one of them. Harry could think of quite a few creatures in the forest that preferred the dark and silently prayed that they weren't visiting the Acromantulas today. He really didn't think Ron would be able to handle it. It didn't take long for Harry to realize that they weren't traveling in the same direction of Aragog's cave. From the relieved sigh that came from Ron, Harry figured that Ron had been thinking the same thing he had.

"I hate to remind us," James said faintly, "But I really don't like the fact that Harry is on a first name basis with an Acromantula."

They walked for approximately ten minutes until they were surrounded by trees that were so close to each other that no sunlight crept through the branches. There was absolutely no snow on the ground, only mud. Hagrid dropped his load on the ground then stepped away

before turning to face the class. Most of the students had never been in the forest and appeared to be one shout away from running for their lives.

"Gather roun', everyone," Hagrid said with a smile. "No reason ter be scared.

"Says you," Lily muttered.

They'll be attracted to the smell of the meat but I'll give 'em a call anyways. Cover yer ears everyone." The students immediately obeyed as Hagrid let out a strange shrieking cry that echoed throughout the forest. After a few moments Hagrid let out another cry then waited.

It wasn't long before Harry noticed strange horse-like creatures appearing out of the darkness. They looked almost starved; their black coats apparently the only thing covering their skeletons. Harry was certain he could see every bone. They had heads that resembled ones belonging to dragons. Their eyes were pupil-less which was extremely unnerving. They had black, leathery wings resembling those belonging to bats.

"That's not that bad," Remus said thoughtfully and James and Sirius nodded.

"Excuse me?" Lily said waving her hands. "What's not that bad?"

"Thestrals," Sirius said.

"Thres- What?" she asked. "And how do you know they won't hurt them."

"Because they've been around the school children all along," James said smirking. He was enjoying being the one with the knowledge, "They pull the school coaches."

"The coaches pull themselves," she said.

"Nope, they don't. But only people who have seen someone die can see them," Remus explained. "I myself can't but Sirius can and made me touch the Threstal in second year when I didn't believe him there was an animal there."

Harry took a nervous step backwards as more creatures arrived. They observed the class for a few seconds before they started attacking the dead animal with their pointed fangs. Glancing around, he saw that no one seemed to notice the creatures. They were all looking up in the trees as if they were expecting something else to come. Harry turned to Hagrid who had his attention on the creatures with a proud smile on his face.

"There's plenty of them aroun' now," Hagrid said proudly. "Now, who can see 'em? Put yer hands up." Harry raised his hand along with Neville and a stringy Slytherin boy standing just behind Goyle. "I figured yeh would, Harry," Hagrid said softly. "Neville, yeh too an'—"

"What are we supposed to be seeing here?" Malfoy sneered.

"Well, if you are too dumb to know—" Sirius started but Lily cut him off:

"I love abusing Malfoy as much as the next person, but you should at least have a good reason. He can't see them Sirius! How is he supposed to know?"

Hagrid pointed to the dead animal. "Watch," he said firmly. After a few seconds several students gasped while others squealed as pieces of the carcass disappeared. "These are Thestrals," he informed the class. "Hogwarts has an entire heard o' 'em in the Forest. "Now—"

"But they're extremely unlucky!" cried a frightened Parvati. "They bring horrible misfortune to those who seem them. Professor Trelawney said—"

"Oh please," James moaned with a hand covering his eye, "Whatever she said is utter rubbish."

Hagrid let out a chuckle. "Tha's jus' a superstition, Parvati," he said. "They aren' unlucky at all. They're very clever an' very useful! How do yeh think yer carriages get ter Hogwarts? The Thestrals pull 'em. They won' hurt yeh. Who can tell my why some o' yeh can see 'em an' some can't?"

Hermione's hand instantly went in the air. Hagrid nodded at her to answer. "The only people who can see Thestrals are those who have seen death," Hermione said confidently.

"Tha's right," Hagrid said with a nod. "Ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, Threstrals—"

"Hem, hem."

Harry suppressed a groan. Professor Umbridge had arrived and was standing not to far from Harry, wearing a green hat and cloak with her clipboard ready. This certainly was not the day for a review. Harry just had a feeling that Umbridge would find some way to make Hagrid incriminate himself, something that really wasn't that hard to do. Harry had managed it when he was a first year.

"Thestrals are not a bad subject. She can't use it against him," Sirius said confidently.

"Wanna bet?" James asked frowning grimly.

"Oh, hello, Professor Umbridge," Hagrid said with a smile. "Glad yeh found the place! We're doin' Thestrals today."

Professor Umbridge simply blinked at him before she started scribbling on her clipboard while muttering to herself similar to what she had done in Professor McGonagall's class. The problem was Hagrid wasn't as confident in his teaching abilities as Professor McGonagall was. Harry looked directly at Hagrid and mouthed 'just ignore her', earning a nod from Hagrid in return, who returned his attention to the class.

"We started off with a male an' five females," Hagrid said, his voice clearly not as confident as before. "This one's," he patted the first horse that arrived, "named Tenebrus. He's the first one born here in the Forest—"

"Are you aware, *Professor*," Umbridge interrupted loudly, "that the Ministry of Magic classifies Thestrals as 'dangerous'?"

"Well, the Ministry of Magic should classify you as deranged but they don't do they?" James sneered.

Hagrid chuckled at the comment. "Anything's dangerous if yeh don' know how ter handle it," he said to Umbridge then returned to the class. "Thestrals have a bad reputation because o' the whole death thing. People used ter think they were bad omens but they didn' understand Thestrals'll leave yeh alone as long as yeh don' attack 'em or get in their way."

Professor Umbridge started walking around; asking questions to the students in a loud enough voice that made it difficult for Hagrid to ignore her. Of course Umbridge only questioned the Slytherin students who seemed to think it was their mission to think up whatever lies they could about Hagrid. Pansy claimed that Hagrid was impossible to understand and had several Slytherins agreeing with her.

Growls were heard and Sirius was twisting the pillow case of one of the pillows that he was practically strangling.

Umbridge didn't stick around much longer after informing Hagrid that he would receive his results soon. Harry didn't miss the look of disgust on Professor Umbridge's face while she spoke to Hagrid. It was clear that Umbridge had already made her mind up about Hagrid

which didn't ease Harry's mind. Hagrid may be a little unorthodox but he knew quite a bit about magical creatures and was certainly enjoyed his teaching position which was more than what Harry could say about Umbridge.

Harry had to admit that the inspection hadn't gone as bad as it could have but it had gone bad enough. Hagrid never had much for self confidence. He needed to be reassured that he was doing something right and Umbridge's attitude and constant questioning had only damaged what had taken so long for Hagrid to build.

For the next few days life at Hogwarts was as normal as it could be, at least for Harry. With the Gryffindor versus Slytherin Quidditch game over, the intense rivalry between houses had shifted back to normal. So far all students had obeyed the warning Professor Dumbledore had given about improper actions against opposing houses, even the Slytherins. Other than some harmless pranking by the twins on other Gryffindors, no one had really done anything.

Harry had managed to avoid attention until Potions class on Thursday where they were brewing an extremely difficult potion. As with all of his potions, Harry was extremely careful in following the instructions. He had been determined not to destroy a cauldron this year and was so far had followed through with the vow. His potions had all been given at least an 'Acceptable' grade, something that seemed to annoy Professor Snape endlessly.

As the end of class approached, Professor Snape started examining the cauldrons. The usual comments of 'dismal' and 'pitiful' were muttered except when Snape took a sniff from Hermione's cauldron before moving on to Harry's. The color of Harry's cauldron was nearly an identical shade of blue to Hermione's, something that Professor Snape would never admit. Knowing the routine by now, Harry moved out of the way and let Professor Snape sniff his potion then watched as the Potions Master examined the texture.

"Too dark and too thick, Potter," Professor Snape said coldly. "Detention tonight at six with your Head of House for your incompetence."

"WHAT?" the four spluttered at once.

Harry tried to ignore the snickers from the Slytherin students as his shoulders hunched forward and head bowed in disappointment. He had done everything correctly but it just wasn't enough for Professor Snape. After dropping off a corked flask full of his potion on

Snape's desk, Harry left with the rest of the class without even daring a look at the overly biased, greasy-haired hook-nosed man. This had been the first time this term where Professor Snape had gone out of his way to signal Harry out. Why?

Probably for revenge, Harry mused. Snape had just lost two members of his Quidditch team

"If he had taught his students better he wouldn't have?" Lily huffed. "See if one of McGonagall, Flitwick or Sprout's students dares do what those two Slytherins did. They would have been hung by their toes and skinned alive. But Snape encourages his students to be bullies and they cross the line!"

Harry spent the remainder of the day in a daze. He didn't know what to think anymore. There was so much happening this term that just didn't make sense. The teachers were acting strangely but that could be because of Professor Umbridge and her High Inquisitor role. His dreams were stranger than normal which was certainly saying a lot. The only good thing that was also strange was that he really hadn't had an outburst since Voldemort had awakened. Harry really didn't know what to think about that. In one aspect, he was grateful that he didn't have to worry about it but on the other hand, it could mean that the next one would be a powerful one that would completely overwhelm him.

After a quick dinner which he barely ate anything, Harry hurried off to Professor McGonagall's office for his detention. He reached it with five minutes to spare. Figuring that he better just get it over with, Harry knocked on the door and heard a firm 'come in' from Professor McGonagall. He opened the door and saw McGonagall sitting at her desk, grading assignments. Not wanting to interrupt, Harry remained by the door until Professor McGonagall looked up at him.

"Close the door, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said sternly, making Harry wince. She hadn't used that tone with him for the past few years. Once Harry closed the door, Professor McGonagall stood up and walked around her desk, her pile of assignments instantly forgotten. "We need talk about the attack in September, Harry," she said in a kinder tone. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Because he was being stupid," Lily huffed.

"There was also the little fact that it would have been their word against the Slytherins remember?" James asked. "Umbridge would turn it around Harry and make it look like he had attacked them."

Lily huffed and scowled but said nothing.

To say that Harry was confused was an understatement. Was she upset with him or not? Why did she want to talk about something that happened months ago? Well, something that didn't really happen months ago. "Excuse me?" he asked softly, not sure that he heard right.

Professor McGonagall approached Harry and met his gaze with a knowing look on her face. "Harry, I spoke with your teammates," she said gently. "I know you were cornered by five Slytherin students when you were grounded by Madam Pomfrey. The question is why did you remain silent about it? Those students were wrong to do what they did. Remaining silent only encouraged their behavior to continue."

"She does have a point," Remus said grimly. "Unfortunately, so does James."

"But nothing happened," Harry protested as he took a step back trying to distance himself from McGonagall. "Words were said, that was all." Of course that wouldn't have been the case if they hadn't been interrupted when they had by the Gryffindor Quidditch team but Harry wasn't about to mention that. "I don't understand why everyone's making a big deal about this. You know Malfoy, he's all talk." *Okay, that's a lie.*

"If that was true then how do you explain what happened after the Quidditch game?" Professor McGonagall asked. "Mr. Malfoy is clearly out of hand. If we had known what he had done months ago then we could have kept an eye out if this inexcusable behavior continued. You should have come to me with this, Harry. I still don't understand why you did not."

"Can I say something without being pummeled to death?" Sirius asked and the others shrugged. "If Harry had said something, Umbridge, as James pointed out, would have done something earlier that would probably make it impossible to punish Malfoy no matter what he did. So in a way it's a good thing that he had the chance to do something so undeniably awful in front of the whole school and cannot escape that punishment. Because I can bet that from now on, while Umbridge is on staff, he will be untouchable."

"I hate to agree with Sirius," Lily sighed.

"Because I didn't want any more attention than I already had!" Harry shouted before he could stop himself and instantly regretting it. Letting out a sigh, Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses and shook his head. This was why he didn't say anything about what happened. No one would understand why he needed to do what he did. "Forgive me, Professor," he said softly. "I didn't mean to shout. You don't know Malfoy like I do. He's jealous of what

happened on the train. He was just trying to convince me that he was the 'king of the playground' so to speak."

"As true as that may be, Mr. Malfoy is not a little boy anymore," Professor McGonagall said firmly. "He is a fifteen-year-old who needs to learn that you don't always get what you want in life. I seem to remember his father being the same way. Did it ever occur to you that Mr. Malfoy may be acting out against any other students here, not just you?"

Harry shook his head. He had to admit that it didn't occur to him. He hadn't heard anything so he assumed that nothing had happened. Malfoy had always targeted Harry and his friends. He never bothered with anyone else then, why should he now?

"Just because you don't know doesn't mean he doesn't. I mean, if people see Malfoy getting away with doing things like this to the Boy-Who-Lived they may think that they common folk don't stand a chance and just keep their mouth shut to avoid even more trouble," Remus shrugged unhappy. "What?" he cried in protest at the looks he was getting. "Harry may not like his fame or the special treatment he gets but he does get it. It's a fact. I'm not talking about Harry here, I am talking about the students that don't have special treatment and that won't think they stand a chance if the one that has can't get any justice."

A firm knock on the door halted the conversation. Professor McGonagall motioned for Harry to take a seat in front of her desk as she moved for the door. Sitting down, Harry set his school bag on the floor as he glanced over his shoulder to see Professor McGonagall open the door and step outside. She kept the door partially opened allowing Harry to hear the conversation although whether that was intentional, Harry didn't know.

"Professor Umbridge, I'm afraid I can't talk right now," Professor McGonagall said in her normal stern voice. "I am currently with a student for detention."

"That is exactly why I'm here, Professor," Umbridge said in her usual sweet voice. "I understand you have Mr. Potter for detention at the moment." A shuffling sound could be heard followed by a rustling sound. "Hem, hem. As a result of recent events, the Minister has passed Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four declaring that the High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Sighed Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc."

"Close enough Padfoot," Remus grunted.

"Can she overturn Malfoy's punishment?" Sirius asked.

"It says she can," James frowned.

"No, she can't. That punishment was issued before that Educational Decree. She can't change it," Lily pointed out.

James looked skeptical.

Before Professor McGonagall could say anything Professor Umbridge forced her way into the office. "Mr. Potter, please come with me," she said in the same sweet voice that made Harry feel ill.

"Now see here, Professor," Professor McGonagall objected. "Mr. Potter was assigned to detention with me. To come in here and alter the punishment like this undermines my authority and the authority of every other professor in this school."

"Like she cares," Sirius snorted.

"Now, now, Professor," Umbridge said with a wide smile as she turned back to McGonagall. "There is no need to be overdramatic. I just have it on good authority that you may be a little lenient on your students, especially Mr. Potter."

Sirius and James looked shocked and Sirius spluttered, "*Lenient?* Minnie lenient? Since when?"

She looked back at Harry, noticing the teenager hadn't moved in the slightest. "Come on, Mr. Potter. The longer you dawdle the later your detention will last."

Not wanting to get Professor McGonagall in any trouble, Harry stood up, grabbed his schoolbag and followed Professor Umbridge, noticing a shocked Professor McGonagall as he passed. This day was just going from bad to worse. This meant that every time Professor Snape was being unfair Professor Umbridge could change the punishment to a night of writing lines in his own blood. No matter what it took, Harry made a mental vow not to give any of his teachers any incentive to give him detention.

"The problem is," James said through gritted teeth, "That both Umbridge and Snivellus do not need an incentive. They will give you detention for breathing too loudly."

Following Umbridge into her office, Harry noticed that the infamous quill was already on the table along with a long piece of parchment. "You know what to do, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said sweetly as she motioned for him to take a seat at the table. "Chop, chop."

Harry suppressed a groan as he set his schoolbag on the floor and took his seat. Picking up the quill, Harry inhaled deeply, already dreading what he knew was going to happen. How many hours would she keep him this time? Reluctantly, Harry put the quill to the parchment and wrote *I must not tell lies*. The words appeared in red on the parchment and on the back of his hand as clear as if it had been there all along. Ignoring the stinging pain from his hand, Harry wrote *I must not tell lies* again and this time felt a more intense pain as the cut on the back of his hand deepened.

It was only an hour into the detention when Umbridge started talking. "Mr. Potter," she said with a sad tone to her voice. "I'm afraid we are having a problem."

"Yes we are. The problem is you are deliberately breaking the law and should be carted to Azkaban!" Lily shrieked.

Harry hesitated and looked up. "Oh, keep writing, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said sweetly then turned her tone back to distressing. "I try and try with you but you can't seem to let it sink in. You are determined to spread lies around the castle. Sometimes I have to wonder if this just isn't a cry for help."

"Pardon me? What?" Sirius blurted incredulous.

Professor Umbridge looked at the scroll in her hands and shook her head slowly. "I believe it all started before your third year with Sirius Black and your uncle," she said thoughtfully. "From what I've learned you were quite the delinquent when you lived with your relatives, causing problems...starting fights. One has to wonder if Vernon Dursley was justified to use whatever means necessary to ensure your obedience."

James rubbed his eyes nervously and hissed angrily, "Please tell me I didn't just hear that?"

Harry froze as he inhaled sharply. No! There was no way what Uncle Vernon did could be justified! Sirius, Remus and the entire Hogwarts staff assured Harry that Uncle Vernon was wrong to take his anger out on a teenager. *No adult has any right to strike a child*. Remus had told him repeatedly that Uncle Vernon had been wrong to do what he did.

"Exactly!" Remus cried. "And you listen to me Harry not to that... that... that- you know!"

Sirius that had been looking exited at the prospect of hearing his friend say something a little stronger about Umbridge deflated and shook his head, "Moony, Moony, Moony. You are a lost case!"

"Terrorizing your relatives with threats of magic, Mr. Potter?" Umbridge said regretfully.

"When did that happen? Because I sure never saw it?" Lily growled. "All I saw was that fat pig beating up my baby!"

"And you wonder why your relatives behaved like they did. Keep writing, Mr. Potter." She waited until Harry resumed writing his lines before continuing. "Perhaps you are the reason your relatives hate magic so much. From what I understand they provided everything you needed for almost twelve years before you accused your uncle of abuse."

"WHAT?" the four cried.

"Provided...what..." James said shaking. "THEY DIDN'T BLOODY WELL PROVIDE ANYTHING TO HIM!"

"AND HARRY IS NOT THE REASON MY GOOD FOR NOTHING SISTER HATES MAGIC! IT'S HER! SHE'S BLOODY JEALOUS AND SHE TAKES IT OUT ON HARRY!"

ACCUSED? Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. Professor Umbridge was blaming him for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's fear of the 'abnormal'. It wasn't true! Aunt Petunia had been jealous of her sister and resented her for being a witch. Aunt Petunia had admitted that much when Hagrid had rescued him on his eleventh birthday!

"That was when the lies started," Professor Umbridge continued. "Once you saw the attention you received you couldn't stop." She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "It's sad that a respectable family must now pay the price. I fear that lying is like an addiction for you, Mr. Potter. Once you start with one you just can't stop. It doesn't help that your—hem, hem—guardians only enforce the lies. You may think you have everyone wrapped around your finger, Mr. Potter, but I know what you're trying to do. I don't think you realize the trouble you have caused for so many."

"I AM GOING TO KILL THAT BITCH!" Sirius cried and lunged towards the book. Remus had to throw himself at the bed to avoid Sirius. James and Lily were trying to help them when suddenly the door opened and the four teenagers froze on the spot. James turned quickly, and with the sweetest and innocent smile he asked:

"Can we help you with something mom?"

Mrs. Potter crossed her arms and looked sternly at her son with a 'you don't fool me James Potter' glare, "What is all the shouting here about?"

"Shouting?" Lily asked nonchalantly. "No one's shouting."

"Oh, yes they are. I heard you," Mrs. Potter said her lips in a thin line and turned to Sirius shaking a finger to him. "And you Mr. Black apologize to Lily right now and do not let me hear you calling her names again!"

"But I didn't-" Sirius tried to defend himself while Lily shook her head:

"He didn't-"

"My hearing is quite good thank you very much and I heard you calling Lily the b- word Sirius. Apologize before I Scourgify your mouth young man," Mrs. Potter said sternly waving her wand.

Very contrite Sirius mumbled, "I'm sorry for calling you that Lily."

"That's fine," Lily patted his shoulder. "I know you weren't calling *me* that!"

Mrs. Potter nodded and said sternly, "I'm leaving but if I hear more yelling I will be separating you four and having you cleaning the whole house without magic."

The four teens nodded their heads very apologetically and waited until Mrs. Potter left. James closed the door and pressed his ear to it. Once he was sure he couldn't hear her anymore he nodded and Remus smacked Sirius' head.

"See what you did? Be quiet now!"

"But Moony, I'm not the only one that yelled. I'm just the one she was close enough to understand!" Sirius moaned.

It's not true, Harry mentally repeated over and over again. The Dursleys were anything but respectable. It's not true. They treated him like a slave. It's not true. Sirius and Remus were the first ones to tell him the truth about his parents and what the Dursleys had done to him. It's not true. Harry trusted them with his life. It's not true. He would never lie about anything like that.

"An ex-convict and a half-breed," Umbridge muttered.

James and Sirius grabbed a pillow each and started hitting them on the wall, the floor, the bed. Then they strangled them and Sirius even bit his.

"Calmer now?" Remus asked as Sirius raised his head, still clutching his pillow and nodded with his jaw tight.

"Perhaps your current living environment has been more damaging than what we originally believed. It seems clear that your relatives were the only ones who could keep someone like you in line, Mr. Potter. It has only been since you left them that you have caused nothing but problems."

"I'm getting sick and tired of Umbridge's implications," Lily said annoyed rubbing her temple.

That's because the Ministry is too daft to accept that they make mistakes! Harry mentally screamed. He could only come to the conclusion that Professor Umbridge was completely out of her mind. Umbridge was obsessed with the Ministry. In her distorted mind everything the Ministry did was right regardless of how true it actually was. ***She is certainly a few bricks shy of a full load.***

"Exactly!" Remus mumbled.

"I suppose it shouldn't surprise me to find you taking advantage of a gracious title and privileges the Ministry had given you," Professor Umbridge continued. "You could be using your fame to be such a positive influence for the Ministry yet you use it to strut around these halls like you own the place. With such an attitude, I find it to be no surprise that others take it upon themselves to keep you in line."

"Oh, so now Malfoy was the one keeping Harry in line and it's Harry that struts around not the little ferret?" Remus asked sarcastically.

Harry's breathing quickened as he tried to keep his emotions under control. He did not strut! How could she be so twisted to think that Malfoy was in the right? Also, he never asked for the fame that came with being the-boy-who-lived; he never wanted it. The problem was no one could seem to realize that.

"You may have many people under your control, Mr. Potter, but I am certainly not one of them," Professor Umbridge said confidently.

"No, you are a Ministry obsessed moron just like Fudge!" Sirius hissed.

"I see what a pampered brat you really are. You seem to make it your mission in life to cause problems. The way I see it, it's only a matter of time before your precious guardians and teachers see you for who you really are. When that time comes, I hope you're prepared to face the consequences of your actions."

"That," Remus hissed offended. "Will never happen!"

Harry could feel his control faltering. *Calming techniques, Harry!* Closing his eyes, Harry tried to focus on anything but Umbridge's voice. She had the right to her own opinion, Remus told him that much. Remus didn't tell him how much her opinion hurt, though. Why didn't anyone understand that he would happily give up the name and all of the fame 'the Ministry' gave him if it meant he could just be like everyone else? Why did everyone assume that he loved the publicity that took away any hope had having any sort of life?

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, Mr. Potter," Professor Umbridge said matter-of-factly. "People like you need a firm hand to keep you in line. It appears that the actions your uncle took have been the only way to keep you out of trouble. In my opinion, it won't be long until everyone awakens to see that you are nothing more than an attention-wanting liar."

"Good thing that no one asked your opinion then!" James growled.

With her speech complete, Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk and started grading assignments. On the outside Harry displayed no sign of her words breaking the surface but inside he was screaming. Remus had insisted that Uncle Vernon had been in the wrong to take his anger out on Harry. The entire teaching staff had ensured Harry that what happened wasn't his fault. That was the reason Uncle Vernon was in jail.

Professor Umbridge was silent for the remainder of the detention. The only sounds that could be heard were their quills scratching parchment and the occasional shuffling of parchment as Umbridge moved from one assignment to the next. Finally at nearly one in the morning Professor Umbridge examined Harry's blood soaked hand before dismissing him with a smile and a sweet 'good night'.

After grabbing his schoolbag, Harry hurried out of the room and for the nearest bathroom. He carefully cleaned his wound before bandaging it up like he had before. His hand was throbbing severely and still bleeding heavily without any sight of stopping any time soon. After hiding his hand in his robes, Harry hurried to the Gryffindor Tower, not wanting to be

caught for being out past curfew and receiving another detention, something that wouldn't surprise Harry in the slightest.

Entering the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry wasn't surprised to find it empty. Everyone had most likely gone to bed hours ago. Maneuvering around the furniture to the staircase, Harry couldn't think of anything except for wanting this day to end. He had thought he could handle whatever Umbridge threw at him but the ridicule she had just given him was something he hadn't been ready for. It had been over two years since he had been subjected to it but this was nothing like what his relatives had said to him. His relatives had never told him that those who cared about him would turn against him since they never believed that anyone saw Harry as nothing other than a freak.

"Please tell me he doesn't believe that b-," James said tiredly but correct as if scared his mother would hear, "that woman said?"

Harry softly entered his dorm room and was instantly hit with the sounds of Neville snoring. He carefully made his way to his four poster bed and set his schoolbag on the floor. He had never thought that he could be so surrounded by people and yet feel so alone. None of them could begin to fathom what his life was really like. At the moment, Harry was willing to go to Malfoy and offer his life to his rival freely. How could people want a life like this?

Changing into his pajamas, Harry subconsciously touched his ribs, remembering the pain that he had felt over two years ago when his uncle had broken them. He remembered Umbridge's words but the truth was he never accused Vernon Dursley of anything. The whole of a man had admitted what he had done. Everyone knew that. Umbridge knew that.

"Do you really think Umbridge doesn't know that," Remus snorted. "Of course she does. But she also knows how to get to you and she is twisted and evil. So she says what she knows will hurt, no matter if it's true or not."

"I don't know," Lily said frowning her lips, "Umbridge is psychotic enough to actually believe what she spouts."

Harry cast a few silencing charms around his bed and then crawled in. He buried his face in his pillow, trying to fight back the tears that so desperately wanted to come. This was the price of keeping his secrets. His friends and teachers didn't understand him, the wizarding world either thought of him as a hero or a liar and he was ridiculed for matters that were long

dead. Professor Umbridge was just trying to make him do something stupid like she always did. It wasn't true. She was lying, she had to be.

But if it wasn't true then why did it hurt so much?

"Because it always does," Remus said sadly in a knowing tone. He was drowned in three silent and supportive hugs.

A/N- Thank you all for your reviews.

This is not mine. Sadly.

CHAPTER 15

Thru the Eyes of the Beholder

For the next month Harry felt himself being pushed past his limit. Professor Umbridge somehow found reasons for assigning Harry detention which gave her hours to drill into his head what a troublemaker he was while he mutilated his hand with writing lines. In addition to the D.A. and Council meetings, all of the fifth year students were given so much homework that it was impossible to get a decent night's sleep so Harry did the only thing he could do.

He cut back on sleep.

Moans were heard.

"Come on! Doesn't anyone notice? Are they all blind? Harry has to be favoring his left hand don't they find it weird?" James cried distressed.

"It's unbelievable the lengths people will go to ignore a problem and pretend everything is fine," Remus said dryly. "They don't do it because they are bad but no one likes to have their peace disturbed so they find excuses. Why do you think Fudge has it so easy denying Voldemort's return? Because no one wants it to be true. The same applies here. Harry makes up weak excuses and everyone believes it."

Throughout the detentions it was becoming more and more difficult for Harry to remain silent while Professor Umbridge ridiculed him, Sirius, Remus, Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall but somehow he managed.

"Okay, Sirius, Remus and Dumbledore I get," Lily said. "But McGonagall. What does she get with that?"

"Minnie has always been a strong supporter of Dumbledore," Sirius shrugged.

That didn't mean he left those nights unaffected. After spending hours in bed calming himself down Harry fell into nightmares of everyone he cared about telling him he was nothing more than a burden and should be sent back to the Dursleys. As soon as the nightmares started Harry was extra careful in casting the silencing charms around his bed. His four poster bed soon became a fortress of charms that made Harry's head ache but at least no one heard him cry out.

Ron and Hermione were also feeling the strain with their Prefect duties that had steadily increased as the holidays drew near. It wasn't uncommon for Ron and Hermione to disappear for hours and return with Ron complaining about trouble causing first years with Hermione only moments away from losing her patience with him. It was hard to figure out who was more stressed with their duties: Ron or Hermione. Hermione clearly loved being a Prefect but still took her responsibility seriously which aggravated Ron who enjoyed his position when he didn't have to discipline or when he didn't have a lot of schoolwork. Their hectic schedules were probably the only reason they hadn't started to question the slowly increasing shadows under Harry's eyes.

Remus shrugged skeptical and said, "See, what did I say? They make excuses. If they have supposedly more responsibilities than Harry they should question why he looks more stressed than them but they don't."

As Christmas drew near everyone seemed to become more and more anxious for a break away from the walls of Hogwarts. Harry was no different. His weekly correspondence with Sirius and Remus had only increased the want to see his guardians face to face although Harry was also nervous. Sirius and Remus were extremely observant and had a tendency to know when Harry was hiding something. There was also the problem that Harry wouldn't be able to blame his exhaustion on schoolwork at home.

"Good," James nodded. "This way Moony and Padfoot can do something about *her*," and the way James spat the 'her' could be only interpreted as an insult.

Ron and Hermione were also going home which would mean this was the first Christmas they were completely separated. Hermione was going skiing with her parents and Ron was going home to The Burrow. It took a while for Harry and Hermione to explain the concept of skiing to Ron who still thought it was ridiculous to strap pieces of wood to your feet and slide down a mountain but they managed.

With everyone leaving for the holidays (especially everyone from the Council), D.A. meetings were being put on hold until everyone returned. When the final D.A. meeting before the holidays arrived, Harry made a point to arrive to the Room of Requirement early only to see that someone had been extremely busy. Christmas decorations were hanging all over the place. It seemed that Dobby had taken it upon himself to spread a little Christmas cheer. The Council arrived shortly after him, also admiring Dobby's handiwork.

"I love Dobby," Sirius said fondly.

"Oh, mistletoe," Luna pointed out dreamily that Harry was standing under it causing Harry to quickly move and the rest of the Council to laugh.

Before anything else could be said D.A. members started to arrive. Tonight was just a review which meant everyone from the Council had a portion of the lesson. Neville covered the Impediment Jinx, Cho covered the Stunning Spell, Justin covered the Disarming Spell, Hannah ran through the basic Protego Charm, Ginny and Luna ran through some basic jinxes, and Harry covered a few of the more advanced spells that the D.A. had learned. From time to time Harry had actually taught when no one from the Council felt comfortable teaching the material. It was a rare occasion for no one from the Council to grasp the material in the Wednesday meeting but it did happen.

Watching the representatives instruct, Harry couldn't help but be amazed at the progress everyone had made so far. Neville and Justin had found confidence, Cho had found something to throw herself into so she wouldn't dwell on the past, Hannah had gained patience, Ginny had stepped out of the long shadow made by her many brothers, and Luna...would always be Luna. She certainly had a unique perspective but now she wasn't hesitant to voice it. The Council had accepted each member for who they were which had done wonders for their self esteems.

After two hours of running through everything, Harry called the meeting to a halt. "Everyone is making excellent progress so far," he announced as he walked back to the Council. "After the break we will begin to cover more advanced material, perhaps even Patronuses if time allows. It all depends on you and how hard you work for it. If you have any questions or ideas, you know who to talk to. Have a Happy Christmas everyone."

Sirius chuckled.

"What?" James asked and Sirius' chuckled turned into full blown laughter.

"I think he has reached his limit and has finally succumbed to insanity," Lily said knowingly.

"That would imply he was sane to begin with Lily," Remus said, "And we all know that is not the case."

"Hey!" Sirius cried. "I am so sane!"

"Why were you laughing?" James tried to divert an argument.

"Because after the way Harry was against being the leader he is always acting like one."

"He does have a point," Lily shrugged.

Everyone slowly filtered out, wishing Harry and the Council a 'Happy Christmas' as they passed. Soon it was just the Council left who cleaned up before they departed for their own towers. Harry walked with Neville and Ginny who were talking quietly about possible material to be covered after Christmas. Harry just listened to the excited chatter. His supervisor role had slowly shifted to supervising teacher but he found that he enjoyed the change. He enjoyed teaching. *As long as everyone treats me normally, I'm fine.*

With the final week of classes before break arriving, Harry made every effort not to give Professor Umbridge any ammunition to give him detention. With the ever increasing pile of schoolwork, Harry really couldn't afford it. He had been up late every night and early everyone yet he was only just getting by. It was almost like all of the teachers were trying to push all of the fifth years into exhaustion before they left.

"They live to torture," Sirius said and gave Remus a dirty look.

"I will ignore that," Remus said lifting his hand and showing his palm to Sirius with a disdainful expression.

Unfortunately for Harry, Professor Umbridge wasn't in the Christmas spirit. Just as class ended on Monday, she declared that Harry would have detention on Wednesday for not paying attention in class. This completely enraged everyone in the class. They had been reading the entire time! How could you be punished for not paying attention when you weren't supposed to be paying attention to the teacher to begin with? What even shocked the class more was that Harry just accepted the unfair punishment and left with Ron and Hermione hurrying after him.

"I can't believe this!" Hermione ranted as they walked to the Great Hall, not caring who may be listening. "That—that hag! How can she possibly use that as a valid excuse for giving anyone detention? We were *reading* the entire time!"

"Really Hermione," Lily huffed. "Like any of her other excuses were valid."

"You should really say something to Dumbledore, Harry," Ron added. "Umbridge is out of control. How many detentions has she given you the past month?"

"Yes Ron, thank you for trying to make Harry see *some* sense," Remus said gratefully.

"More than I care to remember," Harry muttered honestly. His detentions had been at least twice a week which made it extremely difficult for his hand to heal completely between detentions. He had grown accustomed to having his sleeve cover his right hand all the time now to hide the bandages. He had slowly started using his left hand more so he wasn't attracting attention to his right hand and so far it was working.

"So what does she have you doing in detentions, Harry?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Er—just writing lines," Harry said evenly. It wasn't a lie necessarily, just not the complete truth. Harry had become extremely talented in half-truths lately. It was an accomplishment that he wasn't proud of but he had convinced himself that it was necessary.

As one, the three Marauders and Lily thumped their own foreheads and moaned in despair.

"Oh," Hermione said in amazement. It was clear that she hadn't been expecting to hear that. "Well, I guess it could be worse."

"Exactly how?" James cried desperately.

"Right," Harry said softly. "It could be worse." Although he didn't know how it possibly could.

Soon enough time for detention on Wednesday arrived and Harry had to endure hearing Professor Umbridge berating Harry, claiming that he was a trouble-making burden and it was only a matter of time before the wizarding world wizened up and realized the truth while Harry wrote lines in his own blood. Truthfully, Harry was too tired to do anything but listen as Umbridge went on and on for at least an hour before sitting down behind her desk to grade assignments. By now he was used to Umbridge's scolding voice and tried to just ignore it as much as he could.

He was released around eleven and quickly followed the pattern of hurrying to the bathroom to clean and bandage his wound before hurrying to the Gryffindor Tower. By now he had everything down to a routine. He made his way through the empty Common Room without having to look, hurried up the staircase and entered the dark dorm room with Neville's snores being the only loud sound. He maneuvered past the belongings his roommates had left on the floor to reach his bed before changing, casting several silencing charms and crawling in with a hope that tonight would be a night without nightmares.

But like every night, tonight wouldn't be that night. He quickly fell into a nightmare where Sirius and Remus were shouting at him, telling him he was a good-for-nothing freak who would be given back to the Dursleys as soon as Vernon was released from jail so some sense could be knocked into Harry since that was what Harry so desperately needed. Harry tried to plead with his guardians but they wouldn't listen. To them, Harry wasn't worth listening to.

"You know, the fact that Remus was shouting should make Harry realize it's just a nightmare and definitely not possible," Sirius said wisely.

Then the nightmare changed. His body changed. His body was now smooth and flexible. He was gliding like he was on ice but it was cold, dark stone. He was sliding on his belly, flat against the floor. It was strange but he didn't feel strange for some reason. The objects around him pulsed with strange colors. Looking down the corridor, he noticed someone—a man sitting on the floor with his head bowed, his outline clear despite the darkness. He was obviously asleep.

Sticking out his tongue, Harry could taste the man's scent in the air. It was strangely familiar but he couldn't place where from. It was so familiar. He knew this man. Why couldn't he think of who it was? The man started to stir causing his silver cloak to fall as he jumped to his feet, noticing that he wasn't alone anymore. The man was tall compared to him but that didn't matter. He watched as the man pulled out a wand leaving him no choice, no choice at all...

But why? Why didn't he have a choice?

"Well, because the man is about to attack you!" Sirius said in a matter of fact tone. James, Lily and Remus eyed Sirius with a look that clear said they highly doubted Sirius' intellectual abilities.

"I think *Sirius*," Remus said slowly in an annoyed tone. "That this is *clearly* not a *normal* dream"

"How do you know?" Sirius asked huffing.

"Because the first part of the dream wasn't as detailed as this one," Lily said. "The author wouldn't bother detailing it if it was just an unimportant dream."

"Oh well," Sirius said clearly offended and continued in a mock serious voice making quotation marks with his fingers. "If the '*author*' says so. I am *so* sorry I am not as versed as you geniuses in literary tools."

Remus looked to the side and bit his lip toying with the book's pages, Lily chewed her hair and nodded her head to James towards Sirius.

"What? Why me?" James whispered. "I didn't even open my mouth."

Lily huffed exasperated and James sighed, "Sorry Padfoot. I think we are all a little on edge because of the hag. We may have taken our temper on you. Especially the people that are not me in the room."

Remus fidgeted with the book a little more and mumbled embarrassed, "Yes, sorry Padfoot."

"Sorry," Lily said sincerely.

"Well," Sirius said crossing his arms, tilting his head upwards and looking at them from above. "I don't know if I'll forgive you. I have to think and delibera- oof," he was assaulted by three hugs and thrown on the bed.

"Come on Padfoot!" James cried. "Forgive us already."

"We won't get off you until you do!" Remus said in a singsong voice.

"Pretty please," Lily begged.

"Oh, fine. Now get off me. You are running the hair style," Sirius said shoving them off him and straightening his hair and robes.

An overpowering wave of pain flooded him especially around his scar, pushing away any protest as Harry cried out. It felt like his head was being split open by an extremely powerful force. He had absolutely no choice he had to strike the man. It was needed. It was necessary. But why?

He reared high from the floor and struck the man's side...NO! A commanding force pushed Harry backwards allowing him to see a familiar looking snake strike two more times. Harry instantly recognized the man now yelling in pain before falling back against the wall and slumping to the floor, his blood soaking the floor around him. It was Mr. Weasley.

"WHAT?" Remus spluttered looking at the book horrified.

"NO!" Lily cried.

"Mr. Weasley can't die!" James said shocked. "He can't! He's nice Mr. Weasley, who likes Muggles and is Ron's dad. The author can't just go and kill him. It's simply not done."

"Yeah, what James said," Sirius said. "With the literary tools and all."

Before Harry could act the scene quickly distorted into darkness as he quickly sat upright in his bed. He was soaked with sweat, breathing heavily, his head was completely throbbing in pain, and feeling like he was about to lose his stomach. As quickly as possible, Harry untangled himself from his sheets and hurried out of the dorm room, tripping over Seamus's shoes in the process. He ran to the nearest bathroom, to the nearest stall and emptied his stomach in the toilet. Now feeling completely exhausted, Harry flushed the toilet then sat down with his back against the stall. At the moment he didn't trust himself to be able to sit up without some form of assistance.

"Harry," Lily said sincerely "I appreciate that you are not feeling well but... MR. WEASLEY NEEDS HELP! HE IS BLEEDING OUT!"

"Harry!" Ron shouted as he entered the bathroom and made his way to the stall. The moment he saw Harry, his eyes widened at the sight of his friend. "Harry, y—you're bleeding! There's blood all over your face! What happened?"

"What? Blood? How? Where's the blood coming from Moony?" Sirius asked shaking Remus who had to work a lot to pry Sirius' fists from his robes.

"We'll find out if I am allowed to *read*!"

"McGonagall...please," Harry said weakly which was all the incentive Ron needed to run out of the bathroom as fast as he could.

Closing his eyes and tilting his head back against the stall, Harry desperately tried to keep his thoughts in order and not give into the pounding pain in his head. Unfortunately his stomach didn't agree with staying still forcing Harry to retch whatever little was left in his stomach in the toilet. Flushing again, Harry fought the urge to collapse and retook his spot leaning against the stall for support as several people entered the bathroom at an extremely quick pace.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor McGonagall cried at the sight of Harry as she knelt down at his side. "Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Thomas, fetch Madam Pomfrey. Mr. Weasley, inform Professor Dumbledore, the password is Fizzing Whizzbee. Mr. Finnegan, dampen a cloth with cool water. Move boys!"

They didn't need to be told twice and hurried to do as they were told. Harry felt someone moving his fringe off to the side and looked over to see Professor McGonagall with panicked look on her face. He knew he had to tell her what he saw before Ron came back. "Order guard... in corridor...injured badly," he said tiredly as his eyes closed.

"Yes, finally!" Lily cried relieved.

"Are you sure Harry?" McGonagall asked in an urgent whisper.

"Of course he is sure," James said annoyed. "Now get moving woman!"

Harry started to nod but stopped when the movement caused the pain in his head to amplify. He let out a moan but it had been enough for Professor McGonagall who quickly left after instructing Seamus to put the damp cloth on Harry's forehead. A moment later Harry felt something cold applied to his forehead, sending chills down his spine. He suddenly felt so cold but couldn't bring himself to do anything about it. He head lolled forward as he slowly lost consciousness. The last thing he remembered was the feeling like he was being effortlessly lifted out of the stall.

Intense cold surrounded him yet he was covered with blankets. He was shivering, his teeth chattering as he rolled onto his left side and tried to pull his bed covers tighter around him in a hope for some warmth. His head ached and his stomach was uneasy. It took Harry a

moment to remember why he felt so ill. His vision. *Great, just great.* Now he didn't have to worry about normal nightmares but scar nightmares too.

"I can't explain it. I don't know why he isn't responding to any of the potions but I also can't explain how his scar started to bleed. Perhaps the two are connected."

"Because of the vision people!" Sirius cried. "Is everyone incompetent around here!" he moaned into his hand.

"It's a possibility, Poppy. We won't know for sure until Harry wakes. Until then, I must ask that no one be allowed to see him, including his friends. Harry doesn't need the distractions right now."

A cold hand gently brushed his cheek causing Harry shiver. It was almost like he had been touched by a ghost. The hand quickly pulled away then rested on his back with the covers separating any coldness the touch may provide. The hand started to move slowly almost like it was trying to coax Harry to awaken. Harry let out a groan in protest as he tried to bury his face in his pillow. The hand against his back was alerting Harry that his clothes were wet and sticking to him.

"Okay," Sirius said annoyed. "I know I have let my feelings about this known on several occasions in the last few days but I have to...I mean...no one is *listening*," he inhaled deeply and bellowed, "LET HIM SLEEP!"

"Come on, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said softly. "Time to wake up."

Harry let out another groan in protest but he did slowly open his eyes and looked over his shoulder to see an overabundance of white that could only belong to Professor Dumbledore. Reluctantly, Harry rolled onto his back and blinked tiredly at the Headmaster. "P'fessor?" he asked groggily. "Is Mr. Weasley okay?"

Professor Dumbledore carefully slid Harry's glasses on allowing Harry to see clearly. "Arthur is currently at St. Mungo's," he said quietly. "I must thank you, Harry. Because of you we were able to find him before it was too late. Do you feel up to telling me what you saw?"

"St. Mungo's does not mean he is okay," Remus pointed out, "You did not answer the question Dumbledore!"

Harry swallowed painfully, discovering that his throat was extremely dry. Professor Dumbledore appeared to realize this and helped Harry take a few sips of water before sitting down at Harry's bedside. Slowly, Harry told Professor Dumbledore about his 'scar nightmare', having to take periodic breaks for a drink of water when his sore throat made it too hard to continue. It was odd. His throat almost felt like he had been screaming for a long period of time.

When he finished, nothing was said for what felt like a long time. Turning his head, Harry saw Professor Dumbledore had a thoughtful look on his face. "If I understand correctly, you saw everything from the snake's point of view until the attack when you saw everything from the third person point of view," Dumbledore concluded. "I wish I could give you answers for the questions I know are running through your head right now, Harry, but I must ask you to be patient for now, can you do that?"

Harry slowly nodded but had to stop when the movement caused the pain in his head to increase. Professor Dumbledore was about to call for Madam Pomfrey when the sound of the door opening startled both of them. Dumbledore instantly stood and turned, his body blocking Harry's view for a moment until the Headmaster moved aside and allowed a familiar black haired Marauder to hurry to Harry's side and pull him into a fierce hug.

Sirius gasped as he loosened his hold on Harry and felt the teen's forehead. "You're burning up!" he exclaimed then looked at Dumbledore. "You didn't tell us that Harry was ill when you sent us to retrieve Arthur! Why hasn't he been given something for it?"

"Yes," Sirius said triumphantly. "Thank you! Finally someone with some sense."

James eyed his friend and said biting back his laugh, "Padfoot, you and sense do not mix."

A pillow hit James face.

"I didn't know, Sirius," Dumbledore said honestly. "Poppy has tried everything but so far Harry isn't responding to any of the potions. It could be any number of things. At the moment Harry just needs some uninterrupted rest."

"Then let us take him home," Remus said calmly. "He wouldn't have to deal with any distractions like he would here, you wouldn't have to worry about someone sneaking in to see him and we know enough from this summer to help him recover."

"Don't remind me," Lily said darkly.

"Well, at least we know Padfoot and Moony will make him better," James nodded satisfied.

"You don't have to convince me, Remus," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "Harry is your charge. If you two want to take him home until he recovers then that is your decision. Poppy is the one you have to convince. You know how protective she is of her patients, particularly Harry."

"Make a run for it Moony!" James cried. "Get Harry and run! She's getting old, she won't catch you."

Remus looked skeptical, "I think she would, no matter how old she is, and I don't fancy facing the consequences of running from her," he shuddered.

Sirius gently lowered Harry back to the bed and covered him up before running a hand through Harry's wet hair, the familiar action instantly causing Harry to relax and close his eyes. "Get some rest, Pronglet," he said with a smile. "We'll be home before you know it."

Remus reached out and gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "If you need anything, just let us know," he said gently. "We'll be right here."

Harry let darkness consume him knowing that for the first time in a long time, he felt safe knowing that Sirius and Remus were by his side.

"Aw," the four sighed together.

For Harry it was almost like he was trapped in a place between sleep and consciousness. One moment he was in a soft bed and the next he was being carried up stairs with his head resting against his carrier's chest. He was wrapped in a blanket but it just wasn't enough to stop his shivering. A muffled voice spoke so quietly that Harry didn't bother in trying to figure out what was being said. Another muffled voice replied but it was so distant, so faint that Harry wasn't sure he had indeed heard someone speaking. His mind was such a sea of fog at the moment that he really couldn't make out anything yet alone what people were saying.

The person carrying Harry had finished ascending the stairs and was now walking on a smooth surface allowing Harry to begin his descent back into slumber. The descent wasn't long. Before Harry knew it he was being lowered onto a bed and instantly curled up, clutching onto the blanket as if his life depended on it. Hopefully the large piece of cloth would warm him soon.

Hands carefully pried the blanket out of Harry's grasp and pulled him out of his cocoon. Harry moaned in protest as he felt bitter cold surround him even more. He was pulled into a sitting position and held upright as hands started to lift his shirt up. All of the cloudiness in his head instantly vanished as he realized what was happening. Removing his shirt would mean someone seeing his bandaged hand that was currently hidden in his sleeve.

"YES!" James cried delighted.

Harry tried to push the hands away, earning a chuckle at his antics.

"Don't chuckle," Remus said angry. "Find out what's happening!"

"Come on, Harry," Remus said gently. "You're clothes are wet. Changing into some dry ones will warm you up."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at Remus and Remus huffed:

"Well, even the best sometime make mistakes."

"*The best,*" James mouthed to Lily who giggled.

Harry let out another moan of protest as he broke free of Remus' grasp and backed away. He instantly curled into a ball, clutching his hand to his chest. He couldn't let them see. He couldn't let them know what he had to endure for the last term. He didn't want to be a burden. He didn't want to cause trouble because that was what letting them see would do. It was better this way.

"Yes, because that is not suspect behavior at all," Sirius snorted sarcastically.

"Moony, just cast a drying charm," Sirius said on Harry's behalf. "He needs his rest right now—"

"No, Moony don't!" Lily ordered. "Grab his hand and find out what he is hiding!"

"—no Sirius," Remus interrupted. "Poppy told us not to use magic. Besides, look at him. Something's not right."

"Yes, thank you Moony," James said relieved. "I knew we could count on you to figure this out."

He then moved closer to the teen. "Harry, what's wrong with your hand? Let me see it."

Receiving no reply, Remus took another approach. He wrapped his arms around Harry and pulled him upright. "Sirius, look at his hand."

Sirius easily pried Harry's hidden hand out of his grasp and slowly pushed up the sleeve to reveal white gauze that was wet with a mixture of sweat and blood wrapped around his hand.

"What in Merlin's name?" Sirius asked in shock. "Harry, what happened?"

"That hag used a blood quill on him!" Sirius said outraged.

"Sirius," Remus said calmly. "You asked Harry not yourself."

"I was just informing me," Sirius tried to defend himself.

Harry tried to pull his hand back but Sirius wouldn't let go. How could he tell them? What would they think? They would be angry...no, furious. That much was a given. Remus tightened his hold on Harry, pulling the teen deeper into his chest. Harry couldn't move. He was trapped. He could only sit there as Sirius slowly unwrapped the gauze and look closely at the wound.

Sirius inhaled sharply. "Harry," he growled angrily. "Who did this to you?"

"THE HAG!" the four cried.

Harry was clearly shaking but now it was from a mixture of fever and fear. His breathing quickened as panic settled through his body. He couldn't move. He couldn't think of anything except Sirius' anger. 'Who did this to you' changed into 'what did you do' in his mind. It was after all his fault, right? It had to be. He had been the only one singled out by Umbridge. No one else had been punished like this.

"I so hope you kill her Sirius," James hissed through gritted teeth as he strangled a pillow.

His head was tilted backwards before cool liquid filled his mouth, causing him to gag. Some of the liquid escaped his mouth but the majority of it found its way down his throat. The reaction was instantaneous. Harry's body relaxed. He was still shaking from fever but it wasn't anything like it had been a moment ago. Instead of panic Harry found himself unable to think of anything substantial. It was like he was in his own personal bubble. Nothing could hurt him here.

"Yes," Lily prodded. "So now you can tell them everything so they can go and kill the hag very slowly and painfully. But all in a very humanitarian way," Lily added that last part as she received some very shocked looks.

A calm voice that sounded a lot like Remus' entered the bubble. "Harry, what happened to you hand?" he asked.

"Detention," Harry answered groggily before he could stop himself. "Lines...Umbridge..."

"Finally," Remus sighed.

Whatever happened next, Harry was too out of it to know.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU SAY, DUMBLEDORE! I WANT UMBRIDGE ARRESTED AND TRIED FOR ABUSE OF A CHILD AND ABUSING HER POSITION! BLOOD QUILLS ARE ILLEGAL! FUDGE HAS GONE TOO FAR THIS TIME! I WILL NOT STAND BY AND LET THEM GET AWAY WITH THIS!"

"See?" Sirius said frantically pointing at the book. "I told you they were illegal."

"And we don't need the book to tell us who that was," Lily said approvingly.

"Yes, Padfoot and Moony to the rescue!" James clapped his hands.

Harry's eyes flew open at the sound of Sirius' angry voice. He wasn't so cold anymore but now he had an uneasy stomach although not as bad as he had after the vision of Mr. Weasley being attacked. Looking around Harry saw that his room was dimly lit, the source of light being the hallway light shining in from his partially opened door. From the sounds of it Sirius was right outside his door. Pulling his bed covers over his head, Harry slowly tried to make sense of what Sirius was shouting about. The last thing he remembered was talking to Sirius and Remus in the hospital wing. Clearly he wasn't there anymore. He knew his own bed too well to make that mistake.

"Sirius, please calm down," Remus pleaded, his voice sounding tired. "You'll wake Harry and you saw what happened the last time you were upset. Harry was afraid of you. I'm angry too but shouting isn't going to solve anything. Right now it's just Umbridge's word against Harry's. Do you have any idea what a trial like that would do to him, especially now with the condition he's in?"

"Moony," James said slowly and dangerously. "Please tell me you don't plan to let Umbridge get away with this."

"I hope not," Remus said sincerely.

So they know, Harry thought grimly. He knew it had been too much to hope that his detentions would remain a secret, especially with him being ill. From the sounds of it that was all they knew, which was a blessing in its own right. If Sirius found out what Umbridge had been saying...he would probably track her down and curse her for hours...unless he agreed with her...

"Okay," Sirius said tiredly rubbing his temple. "First of all; I do not agree with the hag. Second of all; don't you dare keep all she's done from us Harry James Potter or I'll...I'll...I know, I'll ground you, yeah, until your fifty or something! Ha!"

"I never thought I'd hear those words coming from your mouth Padfoot," James said astonished. "Don't do that again. It's freaky!"

No! Don't think that! It's not true! It can't be!

"Harry can handle it, Moony," Sirius said confidently. "He's strong. He'll do the right thing."

I was doing the right thing, Sirius. I was keeping you safe.

"No, you weren't," Lily moaned.

"If that's the case then why did he try to hide it from us?" Remus countered. "Harry's scared, Sirius. He's scared of us. This is not the same Harry that we've talked to every week. Something happened to him, something traumatic. We need to find out what it was and we won't get anywhere if you can't control your temper. If that's too hard for you, Sirius, then you'll have to stay away from Harry for the time being."

"WHAT?" Sirius cried shocked. "You can't do that Moony!" he told Remus.

"If it's the best for Harry-" Lily started.

"Keeping me from Harry is the best?" Sirius cried.

To his surprise James said seriously, "If you can't control your temper Padfoot, it may be. Would you rather Harry not tell them what happened and shut down?"

"No," Sirius said in a small voice. "But I don't want to go away. I'll control my temper, I promise."

"What is important is to find out what happened to Harry," Professor Dumbledore said calmly. "I spoke with his friends but they knew little. Harry had only mentioned that Professor Umbridge writing lines. He hid it from everyone, Sirius. The question is why. Why would Harry hide something like this?"

"Because he was being stupid!" James cried. "That's why!"

"Umbridge obviously threatened him," Sirius said instantly. "Harry would have told me otherwise." There was a long silence. "Why didn't he tell us, Moony?" Sirius asked painfully. "I thought he trusted us. Why couldn't he trust us with this? Why does Harry always think he has to deal with everything himself? He's just a kid."

"Yes Moony!" Lily asked desperately. "Why?"

"I don't know," Remus said. "Because of the Muggles maybe," he offered.

Harry pushed back the covers and slowly sat up. The hurt in Sirius' voice was too much to bear. Ignoring the wave of dizziness, Harry pulled himself out of bed and stood up, fighting a wave of nausea that threatened to overwhelm his stomach. He covered his mouth with one hand as he grabbed hold of his bedside table with the other to stop the swaying, knocking over a half-full glass of water in the process.

In the blink of an eye Harry found himself being supported underneath his arms and almost carried to the bathroom. The sudden movement was too much in Harry's already nauseated state causing him to lose the fight with his stomach. Fortunately there was nothing actually in his stomach so nothing actually came up. After nearly five minutes of dry heaving, Harry sat back on his heels and was gently urged to lie down on Remus' lap while Sirius covered him with a blanket.

"Feeling better, Harry?" Remus asked softly.

Harry could only let out a groan as his eyes closed. There was so much he wanted to say but he just couldn't find the energy. He wanted Sirius and Remus to understand that he never meant to hurt them.

"We know," Remus patted the book gently.

If there was one thing he learned this year it was that his fame made him a target in more ways than one. Everyone wanted to make an example of him; Voldemort, Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy, and Professor Umbridge being among the many.

"Back to bed," Sirius said as he burrowed his hands underneath the teen's back and knees. "Poppy will be stopping by a little later and then we need to have a talk, kiddo." He repositioned Harry and carefully lifted him off the floor. "Someone's lost weight...again," he muttered as he carried Harry out of the bathroom. "You're supposed to be gaining weight at Hogwarts, Harry, not losing it."

It was clear that Sirius was talking to fill the silence since Harry was half-asleep as it was. Remus could tell that Sirius finally realized that there was a lot more going on with Harry. They had suspected something had been off with Harry but the fifteen-year-old had always claimed that he was stressed with homework. They had believed him and ignored any suspicions they may have had.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were certainly kicking themselves for it now.

"Don't kick yourselves," Lily said sadly. "Unfortunately Harry is very convincing."

A/N- Thanks for the reviews and for reading.

Not mine

Chapter 16

Lies and Truths

"Now we get to see Moony and Padfoot kill the b- er hag!" Lily said gleefully.

Remus cleared his throat and with a predatory smile was about to start reading when the door opened and he quickly hid the book under the pillow.

"Mom?"

Mrs. Potter entered the room calmly. Following behind her there was a tray of sandwiches floating and five glasses of juice.

"I think we should have a light snack here instead of lunch," she said sitting herself on an armchair next to Lily's that was empty. The glasses floated in front of each teen and Mrs. Potter and the tray floated around as each bewildered teen took one sandwich and a napkin.

"So," Mrs. Potter prompted. "Let's keep reading this book that has you all screaming and swearing."

"Huh," James mumbled opened mouthed.

"I don't think it's quite your taste Mrs. Potter," Lily tried to say politely.

"Oh, I think I'll decide that," Mrs. Potter said firmly.

The teens share lost looks with each other.

"It's either I listen in or I confiscate the book. Which would you prefer?" Mrs. Potter said sternly crossing her arms.

The four teen congregated in a tight circle on the bed and whispered fervently. You couldn't hear much except the occasional: "We can't tell her!", "Are you crazy James." After much debate and a lot of poking and smacking of heads, mainly James' and Sirius', James turned smiling innocently to his mother:

"Mother dearest, we have something to tell you," what followed next was a quick summarizing of everything that happened the last three days for them and two and a half years for Harry. Mrs. Potter had seriously considered committing them all into St. Mungo's until Remus showed her the book and the dates. After reading a little of the first chapter Mrs. Potter had tears in her eyes and was caressing the book fondly:

"My poor grandson," she sobbed and then she hugged James and Lily. "My poor babies."

James and Lily eyed each other not exactly sure of what to do but kept still until Mrs. Potter decided to let them go. Remus cleared his throat and motioned to the book eyeing Mrs. Potter, she nodded with her head and he continued the story.

Opening his eyes, Harry had to blink a few times for his eyes to adjust to the sunlight filling his room. He felt extremely warm and reflexively pushed back his overabundance of bed

covers only to be hit with a blast of cold air coming from his opened door. Curious to where the cold air was coming from, Harry slid out of bed, grabbing his glasses off his bedside table in the process. With everything coming into focus, Harry walked towards the partially opened door. Black Manor was large but it was rarely as quiet as it was right now. Sirius hated the quiet. That was why there had been modified silencing charms around Harry's room during the summer. Harry couldn't hear what was happening outside his room but people could hear him.

Entering the hallway, Harry shivered as the cold air strengthened, seeming to swirl around him. He walked the familiar path down the hallway, turning the corner then continued walking to the staircase, trying to stop himself from shaking. Something wasn't right. Sirius and Remus never allowed the temperature to fall this low since the cold tended to remind Sirius of his cell in Azkaban. Each occupant of the Black Manor had their own horrors of the past that affected who they were today. Sirius avoided silence and cold because of Azkaban.

"Oh Sirius," Mrs. Potter sobbed and moved so swiftly that Sirius couldn't exactly say how he had gone from his spot on the bed to being in a tight grip on Mrs. Potter's arms in the armchair.

Remus avoided people around the full moon because of an incident while he had been a student at Hogwarts.

"What incident?" Remus asked horrified. He really did not like to think of the 'incidents' that could happen around the full moon.

"I'm sure it was nothing serious," James tried to assure his friend.

"Yes, if it had been something bad they would have said already," Lily nodded.

"You wouldn't hurt anyone Remy," Mrs. Potter assured him. Mrs. Potter had a very soft spot for James' friends, though right now, Peter had very quickly lost his spot.

Sirius tried to mumble something from where Mrs. Potter was trying to suffocate him but Remus just kept on.

Harry avoided loud, angry voices that reminded him of his uncle.

"Disgusting," Mrs. Potter spat. "How people can treat an innocent sweet child like that."

"I agree with you mum about treating a child like that but how can you know Harry is innocent and sweet? You just got here!"

"Oh shush James, he's my grandson! Of course he is innocent and sweet!"

James just shook his head but Lily nodded approvingly.

As Harry reached the staircase, he could hear distant voices that were too muffled to make out. He held on to the railing tightly as he descended the stairs. He was still shivering and didn't trust himself to walk down the stairs quietly without some form of support at the moment. Knowing his luck he would end up tripping and alerting everyone in the house that he was out of bed. He didn't know if an Order meeting was in process, Sirius and Remus had company, or if something was being discussed that he didn't know about. At the moment, Harry's goal was to make it to the living room and sit down in front of the fire. He could see as he reached the bottom of the stairs that it was currently empty which meant whoever was here must be talking in the kitchen.

Reaching the sofa chair in front of the burning fire seemed to take forever but Harry was grateful he made the effort. The warmth of the fire was exactly what he needed. Staring into the fire, Harry could make out Sirius' voice but he still couldn't understand what his godfather was saying. There was a brief silence then another voice spoke that clearly belonged to Remus but again Harry couldn't figure out what was being said. *Well, at least I know they're here.*

The sound of the door opening caused Harry to quickly look up and see Sirius and Remus enter the room. Both of them stopped abruptly when they noticed Harry. "What are you doing out of bed?" Sirius instantly asked as he approached. He felt Harry's forehead then looked over his shoulder at Remus. "Still a little warm but well enough for his appointment."

"Appointment?" Harry asked in confusion. "What appointment?"

"I bet it's with the lawyer so we can have that b- hum - er - seriously evil woman carted off to Azkaban," Sirius said inching away from Mrs. Potter very slowly and then suddenly scurrying back to his spot on the bed. Mrs. Potter lips had gone in a tight line and she was tapping her wand into her hand.

No one answered him. "I'll let her know," Remus said to Sirius then walked back into the kitchen.

Sirius looked back down at Harry and took a step back as he enfolded his arms across his chest. "We have tried to be patient, Harry," he said firmly. "We thought that you just needed time but we were wrong. We now see that you'll never change. We can't continue to put our lives on hold, hoping against hope that you'll change. We gave you everything, Harry, but I guess it just wasn't enough for you."

"Excuse me; WHAT?" two very angry Potters and a furious Evans yelled glaring at Remus and Sirius who were looking horrified.

"There is a mistake," Remus said. "I'd never... we'd never- There is a mistake!" he begged and Sirius nodded fervently.

Mrs. Potter ripped the book from Remus' hands and hissed, "There better be."

"Or you two will learn what pain means," Lily added. "Because believe me Moony, not even you know what I'm talking about."

Sirius and Remus gulped as Mrs. Potter continued in a very cold tone.

Harry shrank back in his chair, completely confused. Where was this coming from? "What are you talking about?" Harry asked nervously. "What did I do?"

Sirius narrowed his gaze at Harry. "What haven't you done?" he spat. "If your parents could see you now they would disown you.

"You take that back Padfoot!" James bellowed. "Take that back right now!"

"Mistake," Sirius mumbled. "I'd never say that."

You're a disgrace to the Potter, Black and Lupin families. You're a murderer, a liar, and a freak. I never should have taken you from your uncle. That has been the biggest mistake of my life which is saying a lot."

By now Sirius and Remus had inched together and were trembling slightly at the three death glares they were receiving.

"Mrs. Potter, come on. You know me," Sirius begged.

"Last time everything was pointing against Sirius he was innocent," Remus ventured.

"Last time," Lily hissed slowly. "The words weren't coming out of his mouth."

Harry could feel tears falling down his face. How could Sirius say such a thing? How could Sirius agree with Uncle Vernon of all people? Sirius hated the man. "B—but I didn't kill anyone," Harry said in a wavering voice. "I—I never lied to you and Remus. I swear."

The door to the kitchen opened again. Harry looked past Sirius to see Remus entering the room followed by Professor Umbridge and two tall wizards that he had never seen before.

"Okay!" Remus pointed out. "There's definitely something wrong there. Not only me and Sirius would never, never side with Umbridge. But she wouldn't come near me!"

Mrs. Potter raised an eyebrow and said slowly, "He does have a point. I *unfortunately* happen to know her personally and Umbridge would never be less than a mile from a werewolf voluntarily."

"Yes, see," Sirius said relieved. "That's not real," and then as if enlightened. "That's a nightmare. Remember Harry was having nightmares of us agreeing with Umbridge. That's a nightmare."

James frowned his lips and nodded, "Possibly. But if it's not..."

Remus and Sirius inched even closer.

One had short brown hair with hazel eyes while the other had sandy blond hair with blue eyes. Both men had a look of disgust on their face as they caught sight of Harry which made the teen try to shrink back in his chair all the more. Glancing at Professor Umbridge, Harry noticed that she had a look of triumph on her face. That couldn't be a good thing.

"The Ministry appreciates this, Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin," Umbridge said sweetly. "I assure you that Mr. Potter will be rehabilitated in no time. Of course, it all depends on Mr. Potter. I can tell you from personal experience he is rather stubborn so we may need to use other perhaps even unconventional means, if that is all right with the two of you."

"Whatever is necessary, Dolores," Remus said evenly. "We appreciate the Ministry covering the cost of this. We've already wasted plenty of money from our vaults on him."

"Come on! Me! Saying that! Can you really see me saying *that*?" Remus begged and was relieved at seeing that the two parents and one grandparent were a tad mollified.

Harry couldn't help but stare at Sirius and Remus in disbelief. How could they do this? They were giving him over to the Ministry when they had spent months convincing him that it was too dangerous to trust the Ministry at this time? How could they believe anything Professor Umbridge had to say? She was the one lying! She must have said something! It was the only explanation. Sirius and Remus would never do something like this. They just wouldn't.

"No we wouldn't Harry," Sirius cried. "It's a nightmare!"

Sirius moved out of the way allowing the Aurors to approach Harry, grab him under the arms and lift him out of the chair. Panic quickly set in. Harry tried to break free but the Aurors only tightened their grips causing Harry to cry out in pain. "No!" he shouted as he continued struggling to break free. "You can't do this! Sirius! Remus! Please! Don't do this! I'll be good! I promise! She's lying! I swear! Please don't do this!"

"We're only sorry we didn't do it sooner," Sirius said hatefully. "We've made a deal to have your Uncle released. Once that is complete, he'll be the one stuck with you."

Harry stopped struggling as he stared at Sirius in horror. He was going back to the Dursleys? To Uncle Vernon? Vernon would kill him! They were sending him to his death! *But they don't care. I'm just a burden that they don't want anymore.* The realization that his guardians actually hated him was more than what Harry could bear. Sirius and Remus had been his family more than the Dursleys ever could but they hated him just as much. Maybe he was a freak. He had to be if everyone eventually hated him.

"No!" Lily sobbed, "It's a nightmare honey. Just a nightmare. Please be a nightmare."

Arms wrapped around him and held him tightly as his head tilted to the right and rested against something firm. Fingers ran through his hair in a comforting motion. Harry tried to turn his head to see who it was but he found that he couldn't move. The living room faded away into darkness but Harry was too distraught to care. The pain in his heart was excruciating. He wanted to die so that the pain could end, so that he wouldn't remember the looks on Sirius and Remus' faces; the hate that they had for him.

"It's okay, Harry," a soft voice said in his ear. "I'm here. You're safe now. Whatever it takes, Harry, I'm going to keep you safe. I don't care if I have to follow you around until the day I die. That—that *woman* is never coming near you again. The entire Ministry can jump in front of a dragon for all I care." The arms around Harry tightened slightly. "I'm sorry if I scared you, Pronglet. I don't know what she did to you but I promise that we'll help you through it."

"See," Sirius pointed at the book frantically. "That's me. Only I call Harry Pronglet! Told you it was a nightmare."

"Yeah," James said relieved. "Thank God!"

"We are sorry for jumping to conclusions Remus and Sirius," Mrs. Potter said then cleared her throat irritably towards James and Lily who jumped a little and hastened to apologize too.

"Sir'us?" Harry asked sleepily, his eyes still not wanting to open for some reason. Sirius was the only person to call him Pronglet. Why would Sirius be comforting him? Didn't Sirius hate him?

"That's right, ol' Midnight's here," Sirius answered, his voice now soft but relieved. "That must have been some nightmare you had. Remus should be here soon with Dumbledore. We have quite a bit to talk about, Pronglet. We know that something happened over the past few months but we don't know what. We want to understand how something like this could happen."

Harry tried to break free of the arms and left out a groan in protest when he failed. "I'm sorry," he said nervously as he tried to break free again. "Please don't hate me. I—I thought you would be angry...I didn't want to cause any more trouble! I'm sorry!"

Sirius once again tightened his hold on Harry as he buried his face in Harry's hair. "I could never hate you, Pronglet," he said softly. "You are my entire world. You're the reason I'm here and not still rotting in a cell in Azkaban or worse. You're like a son to me, kiddo. I may get angry when someone hurts you but my anger is at them for doing this and at myself for letting it happen. I want to keep you safe, Harry, just like your parents wanted me to."

"Humph," Sirius huffed and Remus glared. Now it was the other three that cowed.

There was a soft knock at the door. Sirius instantly looked up and relaxed his hold on Harry allowing the teen to see two blurs standing in the doorway. Carefully, Sirius repositioned himself so Harry was a little more comfortable as he grabbed Harry's glasses off the bedside table and gently slid them on Harry's face. Everything quickly came into focus but Harry wasn't sure that was necessarily a good thing. He could see the look of regret and pain on Sirius' face.

"How are you feeling today, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked pleasantly as he entered the room and sat down on a chair at bedside.

"Better, sir," Harry answered as he tried to sit up but a hand on his shoulder from Sirius told him to stay put. "Er—what day is it, sir?"

Professor Dumbledore glanced at Sirius over his half-moon spectacles before returning his attention to Harry. "It's Friday morning, Harry, December the twenty-second to be more precise," he said pleasantly. "Before you ask, Arthur is still in St. Mungo's recovering from the attack. The Weasleys at Hogwarts are aware of their father's condition. Molly will be taking them home today. I'm afraid Professor Umbridge wasn't too pleased to find you gone, yesterday morning. I believe she mentioned a week's detention was in order for missing class."

Mrs. Potter stopped reading and just ogled the book.

"Mum?" James asked worried.

"With all due respect to Professor Dumbledore," she said slowly. "Is he MENTAL?"

"Probably," Sirius offered.

"How can he?" she spluttered. "The poor boy has been through torture with that- that-"

"We know a very descriptive word for her," James said eagerly but quickly shut up at his mother glare.

"After that *woman* puts *my* little grandson through torture he goes and mention that she is *still* in a position to issue detentions and not locked up in Azkaban," Mrs. Potter shrieked and Lily and Remus nodded fervently in approval. Even wanting to see Mrs. Potter curse, James and Sirius actually quite agreed with her.

Harry instantly stiffened as he stared at Dumbledore in horror. A week! He didn't think he could handle an entire week of Umbridge's detentions. Reflexively, Harry clutched his right fist to his chest as his breathing started to become erratic. He barely registered that someone was trying to get his attention. All he could think about was an entire week of Professor Umbridge ridiculing him and telling him Sirius and Remus would eventually agree with her.

The next thing Harry knew all feelings of panic were gone and replaced by a floating and hazy feeling. He felt his body relax as his head became too heavy to hold upright. Someone tilted his head upwards allowing Harry to see the concerned gazes of Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore. He slowly blinked and noticed that Remus had an empty potion vial in his hand. It had to be some sort of Calming Draught.

"I am sorry, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said sincerely.

"You better be," Remus huffed crossing his arms.

"If I had known your reaction would be like that I never would have said anything. I must apologize, my boy. I never considered that Professor Umbridge was using illegal materials in her detentions but I have a feeling it goes deeper than that. We need to know what happened in these detentions, Harry. Your guardians want to press charges but to do that we have to know what we're dealing with. Do you feel up to telling us?"

Harry's head tilted to the right and rested against Sirius' chest. It took a few moments for him to process everything Professor Dumbledore said. Sirius and Remus wanted to press charges? That would only cause trouble. "Why?" Harry asked groggily. "You told...me not to...cause trouble...I was just...doing what you...told me to."

"Nooo," Lily moaned grabbing her hair in desperation.

"Harry!" Sirius cried distressed. "That's not what they meant!"

Mrs. Potter looked at Remus and Sirius seriously and said, "You two better have a long nice chat with my grandson about this and explain yourselves properly this time."

Remus and Sirius nodded fervently afraid to incur her wrath. Lily was quite appreciating the power Mrs. Potter seemed to have with the Marauders.

Remus sat down on the edge of the bed and took hold of Harry's left hand. "We never meant for you to face something like this alone, cub," he said sadly. "You must have known what Umbridge was doing to you was wrong. Teacher or not, no one has the right to have you mutilate a part of your body. From what we hear this has been happening for at least a month, right?"

"Yes Moony, show him the rule guides!" James said pleased.

Harry nodded slowly. His mind was starting to clear which made thinking a lot easier. "She didn't like what happened to Malfoy," Harry said softly. "She—er—she blamed it on me, saying that I asked for it what Malfoy did to me." A part of Harry knew he shouldn't say anything but he had been keeping it all inside for so long that he didn't think he could handle it anymore.

"She said Uncle Vernon had been right to punish me like he did. She said I deserved it." He felt Sirius stiffen and Remus' hand tighten around his. "She...she said I was a burden and...and it was only a matter of time before everyone hated me." Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in Sirius' chest. He hated appearing weak but he couldn't help himself. Everything he had been suppressing was coming to the surface. "I'm sorry! Please don't hate me! Please! Please don't send me back to her! Please don't send me to Uncle Vernon! Please!"

"Never!" Sirius said firmly.

"Over my dead body!" Remus said and Lily hit him.

"Don't say things like that!"

Somehow Sirius and Remus managed to hold Harry in a group hug.

"Aw," James cooed and opened his arms, "Group hug."

The other four occupants of the room surveyed him warily as he beckoned them. Lily leaned towards Mrs. Potter and asked:

"What should we do?"

Mrs. Potter shrugged, "He won't stop until he gets his group hug. We are better off caving so we can go on."

And thus, James got his group hug.

Both Marauders were speechless along with the Headmaster. They had never suspected something this severe had been happening right under their noses. Noticing that Sirius and Remus weren't going to release Harry anytime soon, Professor Dumbledore stood up and placed a gentle hand on Remus' shoulder. "I will have Professor Umbridge removed from the school and charged with abusing her position, using an illegal artifact on a student and abusing a student," he said softly. "I will be by later with a Pensieve so we can view these detentions. If you need anything, please let me know."

"Finally," Lily huffed. "At last *someone* does something!"

Remus nodded in confirmation then returned to attempting to comfort his distraught charge. Harry eventually fell back asleep, exhausted. The guardians quickly transfigured some

furniture so someone could be in the room at all times. They now knew where Harry's nightmares were coming from and had a feeling it would take a long time to extinguish the doubts Dolores Umbridge had planted in Harry's mind.

"We have faith in you two," Lily said.

"Especially Remus," Mrs. Potter nodded.

Sirius scowled and crossed his arms but he grinned widely when Lily said:

"Actually, future Sirius is quite adept at caring for Harry."

It was a few hours later when Harry awoke from his dreamless slumber to see that there were a few things that weren't right. To start with, someone was touching his face, particularly his forehead causing Harry to open his eyes in confusion. Next Harry saw that he wasn't alone. There were five blurry figures standing over him. Noticing his confusion, Harry's glasses were slid on his face allowing him to see the figures were Sirius, Remus, Professor Dumbledore, Tonks and Professor McGonagall. He blinked a couple times to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing then tried to sit up only to be immediately helped by Sirius and Remus. It was then that Harry noticed the furniture in his room had changed. There were several more chairs and tables throughout the room. Parchment, ink and quills covered the tables. It made Harry wonder what had been going on when he slept.

Glancing at the five adults, Harry noticed worried expressions on all of their faces. Sirius and Remus also looked exhausted which made Harry feel guilty for being the cause of it. This wasn't the way he wanted to spend the holiday and this was the reason why. He didn't want people feeling sorry for him and feeling guilty because Professor Umbridge was completely out of her mind. It wasn't like they could do anything about it anyways.

"Hum, yes they could," Remus told the book. "If they know what's happening."

"Good afternoon, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said with a smile. "You just missed Madam Pomfrey. You have been deemed healthy but could use a few hearty meals to put on a little weight. I took the liberty to invite Dobby over for the holidays. He assures me that you will have plenty to eat whenever you need it."

Sirius barked out laughing, "Bet Kreacher will love that!"

Harry scowled as he looked away. "He'll feed me 'til I burst," he grumbled but everyone heard him and chuckled at the comment since they were well aware of the house elf's attachment to Harry. "Is Kreacher okay with another house elf here?" he asked after a moment.

It was Sirius' turn to scowl. "Kreacher could use a few lessons from Dobby," he said bitterly.

"Yes he could," Sirius nodded.

"Sirius!" Mrs. Potter and Lily scolded at the same time. "Be nice!"

"That elf has been sulking around here, not doing a single thing ever since you left for school. It takes every ounce of self restraint I have not to hex him."

"As you can see Mrs. Potter," Lily said. "Some things don't change."

Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat, ending the conversation. "I hate to intrude but there are a few matters we need to discuss," he said seriously. Sirius and Remus instantly picked spots on the bed and sat down by Harry while Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Tonks sat down in chairs at Harry's bedside. "I should inform you, Harry, that Professor Umbridge has been temporarily removed from Hogwarts, pending the outcome of the investigation of the charges your guardians have filed on your behalf."

"Good," James nodded stiffly.

Harry visibly stiffened at the mention of 'charges'. "Why?" he asked quietly as his gaze dropped. "Why do we have to make such a big deal out of this? It's only going to cause problems."

Sirius shook his head desperately.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled him into a one-armed embrace. "Don't you even think like that," he said firmly. "If we don't stop Umbridge now what's stopping her from continuing with you and even other students? Harry, this would be like walking away after I saw what your uncle did to you. I can't do that. We can't do that. We're supposed to be the ones protecting you from harm, not the other way around."

"Well said," Mrs. Potter beamed with teary eyes. "I'm so proud of you boys."

Remus and Sirius smiled awkwardly.

Professor Dumbledore reached out and touched a shallow stone basin with strange carvings around the edge that weren't recognizable that was sitting on Harry's bedside table. Inside the basin was a whitish silver substance that swirled and separated on its own accord. "This, Harry, is a Pensieve," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I believe you remember how you allowed us to see what happened in the graveyard?" Harry nodded. "This is similar to that but it isn't nearly as draining on the body. It allows someone to view their memories at their leisure to spot patterns and links that they normally may not see. It also allows others to view someone's memories at no pain to holder."

Sirius pulled Harry closer while Remus rested a hand on Harry's back, reminding the teen that they were both there. "You want me to put the vision I had in there?" Harry asked tentatively. He didn't know if he wanted everyone else to see that. Just thinking about it still made him sick to his stomach.

"Not the vision," Professor Dumbledore said patiently. "We need the memories from your detentions. We need to see what Professor Umbridge actually did. The Wizengamot will need to see proof that we are not making this up to remove a Ministry appointed teacher from Hogwarts." Harry moved to protest but Dumbledore motioned for Harry to hear him out. "I realize that the emotions that come with these memories may be painful but we need to know, Harry. It was my responsibility to keep you safe at school and I failed. Please allow me to take the steps to right the wrongs that you have had to endure this term."

How could he say no to that? Professor Dumbledore was practically begging him for the memories, something Harry never thought he would hear. Reluctantly, Harry nodded as his gaze fell and heard a collective sigh of relief. Evidently Professor Dumbledore wasn't the only one who believed that Harry would refuse to have others view his memories.

"The way Harry is," James mumbled. "It wouldn't surprise me at all if he refused."

Of course Harry always had a tendency to give in when someone begged him to do something.

Professor Dumbledore pulled out his wand and held it out so that the tip of the wand was touching Harry's temple. "Concentrate on your first detention, Harry," he said gently. Harry closed his eyes and did so, remembering the first time the quill cut into his hand. A few moments later the sound of Professor Dumbledore's voice pulled Harry out of his thoughts.

"Very good, Harry. Now, concentrate on your second detention." Once again Harry concentrated until Professor Dumbledore's voice told him to move on to the next detention.

"If he is going one by one," Remus said, "That is going to take a *long while*."

The pattern continued for what felt like exhausting hours. In the end there had been almost twenty detentions that had been put in the Pensieve, shocking everyone present. They had been aware that Professor Umbridge had given Harry more than his fair share but they had never imagined there had been so many and Harry hadn't complained about it. The only reason Professor McGonagall had know there had been quite a few was because she had overheard a few Gryffindors complaining about how unfair Professor Umbridge was being to Harry.

After a quiet lunch in Harry's room, Harry was given a sleeping potion to rest while the five adults viewed his memories. The first three detentions had left them furious. They had only viewed portions of the memories since Professor Umbridge had kept Harry so long every night but they got the overall idea of what Harry had been through. The detentions after that left every single one of them horrified. They couldn't find words to describe the variety of emotions coursing through from watching Professor Umbridge continuously blame Harry for matters that were not of his doing. No wonder the teen had been so determined not to say anything.

It was four hours later when the five adults left the memories in the Pensieve to see that Harry was still sleeping peacefully. Sirius instantly approached his godson and gently lifted the teen's right hand. He could still see the words '*I must not tell lies*' written on the back of it. Sirius sat down on the edge of Harry's bed, still staring at the words on the skinny hand. "I don't care what it takes, Dumbledore," he said solemnly. "I don't want her ever coming near my godson again. Because of her, Harry can't sleep through the night without nightmares of us hating him. Because of her, Harry has taken everything on himself trying to protect us." He looked up at Dumbledore with a pained look on his face and tears in his eyes. "Because of her, my godson is afraid of me. If you don't do something to stop her, I will kill her myself."

Mrs. Potter sniffed and Lily passed her a paper tissue. Mrs. Potter nodded thankfully at the also sniffing girl.

"Sirius," Remus warned but was silenced with a glare.

"Aren't you angry, Moony?" Sirius asked in disbelief.

"Of course I am!" Remus cried shocked. "Do you think I like seeing my cub getting hurt?"

"Well," Sirius fidgeted. "You have to admit you're not showing it much."

"Well *maybe* I have my reasons!"

"That—that *hag* forced Harry to mutilate his own hand while she sat there and watched! She made Harry believe that we would turn against him! How can you just sit there—"

"—because unlike you, Sirius, I don't have the option of allowing my emotions to overpower me at the moment," Remus spat. "You have no idea how hard it is to suppress the wolf right now so don't start scolding me on how I should be acting."

Remus crossed his arms and glared at Sirius who looked apologetically. James got on the bed and patted Remus back, "There, there. Padfoot was just nervous. You know how his mouth sometimes gets the better of him." Sirius nodded earnestly and Remus gave one last glare and turned to listen to Mrs. Potter read.

"Boys," Professor Dumbledore interrupted calmly. "Now isn't the time to allow our differences get in the way of what we must do. Harry is going to need us more than he realizes to move past this. With Christmas on Monday, we can't do anything until afterwards. I will do what I can to set up a hearing as fast as possible for Harry's sake. The sooner we can have this matter dealt with the less likely the press will get wind of it. If you need anything, don't be afraid to contact anyone in the Order besides the Weasleys. I suspect that they have enough on their plate right now."

Nodding in agreement, Sirius and Remus watched as Professor Dumbledore left, Pensieve in hand, with Professor McGonagall following him. "I'm sorry, Moony," Sirius said regretfully. "I—I just don't know what to do. I feel so helpless. How could I have been so blind? I saw that he was slowly pulling away but I just thought it was teenage stuff. I thought that we could work everything out over the holiday."

"See," Sirius said with his best puppy eyes leaning towards Remus. "I'm sorry Moony."

Remus huffed but patted Sirius head nonetheless.

"Join the club," Remus said truthfully. He slumped down in the nearest chair and rubbed his tired eyes. "It's going to take a lot of work to fix this."

"So we do what was done when the summer holidays began," Tonks offered as she sat down in the chair next to Remus. "We take shifts with him. We're his family. We can't do any less."

Sirius and Remus had to agree. For Harry, they couldn't do any less.

Harry didn't wake until early evening only to find that he wasn't alone. He was sleeping on his back and on his chest was a familiar black head of fur that could only belong to Midnight.

Reflexively, Harry started petting Midnight as he let his eyes close again. He didn't know why he was so tired. He had slept through the majority of the day so how could he still need sleep? Whatever the reason, Harry decided that sleep was probably the better alternative at the moment.

He didn't want to face Sirius and Remus right now. How could he make them understand something that he just felt he had to do? How could he explain how important a family was to someone who grew up having none? Deep down Harry knew that Professor Umbridge had only said what she did to instill doubt concerning his guardians' feelings towards him. Deep down he knew that Sirius and Remus would never give him back to the Dursleys.

However, sometimes the mind isn't so rational, especially after a nightmare. It was childish, he knew it. He was fifteen and shouldn't be worried about whether Sirius and Remus would abandon him but the truth was that he worried about it every day. He still worried that he would wake up and his life with Sirius and Remus would only be a dream. Those worries on top of everything else had pushed his paranoia over the edge.

**A soft whine could be heard from Midnight. Harry knew the mutt was awake and was worried about him. Letting out a sigh, Harry opened his eyes to see somewhat blurry blue eyes looking back at him. "I'm all right, Midnight," he said softly. "Just tired for some reason."
Change the subject, Harry. "You know, I think we need to have a little talk. You aren't getting any younger, Midnight. I think we should start looking for a friend for you—a female friend. Wouldn't you like to have a litter of puppies running around the house?"**

James, Remus and Lily burst out laughing and Mrs. Potter didn't understand what was going on. Apparently she had forgotten that at the beginning of the chapter Sirius called himself Midnight and on

their Summarizing of what happened the teens had just told her Peter betrayed them and went into hiding after framing Sirius. They hadn't exactly explained how he did those things. Thus, Mrs. Potter was quite clueless to what was so funny.

Midnight's head instantly raised off on Harry's chest as the dog stared with wide eyes. *Oh yeah, I will be paying for that*, Harry mused. The dog let out a snort then stood up, turned around and sat down with his back facing Harry in an attempt to prove that Harry had offended him.

"That is one smart dog," Mrs. Potter said and Sirius said:

"Thanks."

But James had gone still and pale as he realized something.

Harry let out a sigh as he sat up and moved to the edge of the bed but hesitated before leaving the warmth. "I didn't mean anything by it, Midnight," he said softly. "I just meant—well—you're a good Dad and I thought you would want your own—er—puppies not—well—it's not important. Forget I said anything." Before Harry knew it an arm wrapped around him and held him tightly while a hand ruffled his hair.

"You are my son, Harry," Sirius said sincerely.

"Yes you are," Sirius said firmly and then looked worried as Mrs. Potter stared at him suspiciously.

"Sirius," she said calmly.

"Yes."

"Were you by any chance that dog?"

"Maybe," he said in a small voice.

"Please tell me this is something you will achieve after you graduate."

Sirius Black was extremely brave, after all he was a Gryffindor, but he wasn't stupid, and Mrs. Potter's wrath was not something he welcomed. So he did the first thing that came to his mind, he pointed at James and cried: "James is an Animagus too!"

James, who had been quite still and trying to be invisible since he realized what was about to happen, opened his eyes wide in shock and snapped his head at his glaring mother.

"James," she hissed dangerously.

He smiled weakly and said, "Yeah."

"What did Sirius mean by that?"

"Well, you see.. maybe.. there's a chance... and with Moony... not that Moony is but for him..."

"James!"

"We became Animaguses in fifth year to keep Moony company," he blurted at once.

Mrs. Potter sighed and rubbed her temple. Lily tried to help:

"It was quite noble of them."

"And stupid and dangerous. You three outside," she snapped at the boys and Remus was smarter than to ask why he was getting scolded too and he scurried outside with his friends. Mrs. Potter closed the door behind her and Lily tried her best to hear behind the door but obviously a Silencing charm had been erected. After what seemed like hours the three red faced boys and Mrs. Potter came back in. She took her place as the subdued boys sat silently.

"Maybe not biologically but in my heart, you are my son." He released Harry and hopped off the bed before taking a seat in the nearest chair at Harry's bedside so they were face to face. "That means that I will never turn my back on you, you know that right?" He waited for Harry to nod before continuing. "Umbridge was wrong to do what she did. She was wrong to say what she did. She lied, Harry. We would never give you back to your uncle no matter what you did. You are stuck with us; me, Moony and Tonks. We're your family."

"Yes," the four teens cried together and Mrs. Potter hid a smile behind the book.

Harry bit back the urge to point out the Dursleys were also his family. *Don't think about them!*

"Yes, don't," Lily growled. "Good for nothing sister."

"Now that you are mentioning it," Mrs. Potter said apologetically. "Harold did mention your sister was- er- not very nice to the Aurors at your house."

"Mr. Potter is a very polite man," Lily snorted. "Not very nice is down playing it *a lot*."

He hated that he now had so many doubts about the family he had felt so comfortable with only a few months ago. Harry knew Sirius, Remus and Tonks were nothing like the Dursleys. He hated himself for even thinking that his new family would be anything like his old one. He hated himself for allowing Sirius and Remus to know that he was afraid of them now.

"They should know so they can help," James offered.

"Yes, Harry so now Padfoot and I can repeat every second that that hag was wrong!" Remus said firmly then his eyes went wide and he covered his mouth.

"I'll let that pass since this person deserves it," Mrs. Potter said.

"So we can say anything we want about Umbridge," Sirius looked eager.

"I said I'll let *hag* pass, not *anything*," Mrs. Potter said firmly.

"So, are you hungry, Harry?" Sirius asked as he ruffled Harry's hair again. "I'm sure Dobby would make you anything you wanted."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't hungry but he knew saying as much would only worry Sirius. His godfather had always grumbled about his lack of appetite, declaring that if he ever came across the Dursleys he would curse them into the next century.

"Want help?" Lily asked.

"I'll let you come," Sirius said generously.

Harry shuddered at the thought of how angry Sirius had to be to for him to be shouting at Professor Dumbledore about Umbridge. He had never heard Sirius so angry before.

"To be honest Harry," James said. "Padfoot doesn't need much to shout! He just doesn't get angry at you. But cross him and feel your eardrums burst!"

Sirius looked very proud of himself.

"Harry?" Sirius asked gently. "What's wrong? You're shivering. Are you cold? Is your fever back?"

Harry quickly shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said softly as he avoided Sirius' gaze. "It's nothing." *Nothing worth worrying you about, Sirius. I'm just being stupid by letting anything Umbridge said influence me.* He had told himself that she had been lying over and over again yet it seemed that some of the endless ranting had stayed with him regardless.

Sirius gently touched Harry's forehead with the back of his hand. "You are a little warm but it could be from sleeping under so many blankets," he said thoughtfully then stood up. "Make yourself comfortable, kiddo. I'll wake Moony so we have all have dinner in here together."

"But if he's sleeping—"

"—he wanted me to wake him," Sirius insisted. "Tonks is at work so it's just the three of us." Sirius gently rested a hand on Harry's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "We have to talk about a few things, Harry, including what will be happening with Umbridge. I know you probably don't want to deal with it but you have to. Ignoring what she did to you won't make the nightmares and the doubts go away."

Harry reluctantly nodded but remained silent. Sirius gave Harry's shoulder another squeeze before he left the room. He really didn't want to talk about his nightmares. He didn't want Sirius and Remus to know how easily he allowed himself to become affected by Professor Umbridge's words. Granted the repetition of Umbridge's words probably had something to do with it but it didn't change the fact that Umbridge had won. She had succeeded in making Harry believe that his stable life with his guardians wasn't as stable as he originally thought.

A hand against his forehead quickly pulled Harry out of his thoughts. Looking up, he saw Remus give him a soft smile but that didn't hide how tired the man looked. Harry's gaze fell again when he realized that Sirius and Remus were probably taking shifts like they had during the summer when they were too scared to leave him alone. *One step forward, two steps back.*

"You look better, cub," Remus said reassuringly as Sirius sat down in the chair he had previously occupied. "No nightmares, visions or anything of that sort?" He let out a relieved sigh when Harry shook his head then sat down next to Harry on the bed and wrapped an arm

around Harry's shoulders. "Well, that's good. We should have some Dreamless Sleeping Potion by morning for you in case you need it."

"You know, not to take any merit away from you Sirius," Lily said. "Future you is really good with Harry, but Remus just has a calming thing don't you think? Like when he is around everything is good and safe."

"Yeah, like when you read Sirius you know everyone is up and acting but then Remus comes and this peaceful vibe goes around," James said.

"You know Mrs. P," Sirius huffed. "I'd be worried with them talking about peaceful and vibe, it's very fishy. I'd start checking their potions supplies." He was pelted by pillows.

Harry fidgeted nervously. He was already dreading the long talk they would need to have and figured it was best to just get it over with. "Do the Weasleys know about this?" he asked softly.

"At the moment, no they don't," Remus said gently. "We didn't want to worry them with but we will have to tell them soon. Dolores Umbridge's suspension won't be kept a secret for long. We were lucky that Amelia Bones stood up and took action on our behalf so we need to use whatever advantage we have right now. Dumbledore will be calling an Order meeting later tonight to inform everyone of the situation—" Harry moved to protest, "—to prevent the entire Order from barging in here to find out if what they hear at the Ministry is true and because you will need protection when the hearing is held."

Harry instantly stiffened at the mention of a hearing. He could picture it in his mind. He would be accused of lying and causing problems because he wanted attention. He didn't think he could handle someone taking his messed up life apart. He didn't think he could handle Sirius and Remus being attacked because they were his guardians. Everyone he cared about would be attacked because of him. Was it worth it? Was he worth it?

"Of course you are!" Lily said firmly.

"This boy has serious issues," Mrs. Potter said.

"We know you're scared, Pronglet," Sirius said, noticing the change in Harry stature. "Please understand that this is something we have to do. Amelia Bones was horrified to learn that Umbridge had been using a Blood Quill on you. The Ministry had banned the use of them years ago. Umbridge knew this. She knew that she was using an illegal artifact on you. Fudge

claims ignorance, of course, but if Umbridge is found guilty then there's a good chance that Fudge's role in everything will be under a lot of scrutiny."

"But that will cause a lot of trouble," Harry protested. "What about the Order?"

Remus gave Harry a reassuring one-armed embrace. "Don't worry about it, cub," he said with a smile. "I had a feeling this was the situation. You didn't tell us anything because you were worried about us and the Order." Harry only shrugged but the lack of protest was all the Marauders needed to know it was the truth. "Let us be the adults, Harry. Let us do this for you. It isn't right to have a teacher that abuses you and it is our responsibility along with your Headmaster to stop it from continuing. You understand that, right?"

"Too right it is," Mrs. Potter huffed.

Harry understood what was being said he just didn't like that so much fuss was being made over this and will continue to be made over it. There was also the possibility of the Wizengamot not believing him. "What happens if we lose?" he asked. "I don't know if I can go back to Hogwarts. She'll give me detention every night until summer vacation."

"We won't lose," Sirius said firmly. "We'll have Dumbledore's Pensieve there with your memories. Once the Wizengamot view them Umbridge won't be allowed anywhere near Hogwarts, let alone you. Trust us, Harry. We're going to fix this, no matter what it takes. It's the least we can do."

Harry had to smile. He couldn't help but believe that his guardians were going to make everything better. It was a childish notion but when Sirius Black was determined it was extremely hard not to believe him. Leaning against Remus, Harry closed his eyes and realized for the first time in months he felt normal. He didn't have to worry about secrets or being the perfect student for everyone that had been watching him. Here, in the Noble House of Black, Harry was just Harry and that was enough.

"Aw, my little grandson," Mrs. Potter cooed and James, Sirius and Remus shook their heads as she was joined by Lily on the cooing.

A/N- Hope you liked this. Sorry for the delay, you know RL and all. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Not mine at all.

Chapter 17

Christmas, with Family

"Yay," Sirius clapped his hands happily.

"He did that for the other books too," Lily supplied Mrs. Potter helpfully.

"I'm not surprised dear," she answered. "You should see him in Christmas morning. I had always thought James was impossible Christmas morning until Sirius first Christmas here. Then I discovered my son is a very tame angel."

Sirius was beaming happily and jumping up and down on the bed.

The Order meeting could have gone better. That much was clear. Harry been asleep with the modified Silencing Charms around his room which had been the only reason he didn't wake then the shouting began. With Order Headquarters being at Harry's home, the majority of the members were on a first name basis with the teenager. They had grown to know Harry the teenager, not the-boy-who-lived. Harry was a member of the Order family so naturally anything that happened to him would be taken personally by the Order.

The Order, however, had never expected anything like what they heard from Albus Dumbledore. They had never expected that something so unspeakable could happen right under everyone's noses. It didn't help that Bill Weasley had been present, as a representative of the Weasleys who were in the Order. Like the other Weasley brothers, Bill saw Harry as a younger brother and was prepared to avenge him along with the majority of the Order. It took quite a bit of patience on Dumbledore's part to calm everyone down

"Aw, come on!" James whined. "Why did you calm everyone down?"

"I quite agree. Dumbledore should have just opened the door and pointed the way towards Umbridge," Remus said calmly. The other four members of the reading group had a collective jaw drop.

"Moony," Sirius said in awed pride. "I always knew you had it in you."

and explain what would happen with Dolores Umbridge and Harry's part in it. Everyone was eager to help in serving as a guard for Harry for the hearing but in the end Tonks and Mad-

Eye Moody were chosen because everyone already knew of Tonks' connection to Harry and Mad-Eye Moody was a publicly known supporter of Dumbledore.

The question of the night had been what to tell the remaining Weasleys. As much as Sirius and Remus wanted to avoid a furious Molly Weasley, they knew hiding something like this from her would only make things worse.

"After all Moony and Padfoot have a lot of experience with mom," James said knowingly.

"And what exactly do you mean by that young man?" Mrs. Potter asked dangerously.

James gulped, "Hum, er, you see...thing is Mrs. Weasley is a lot like you, you know? A great mother, very concerned...yes, so they have experience of why it's wrong to keep things from the best mothers ever."

Mrs. Potter straightened out, "Flattery always help," she smiled and then narrowed her eyes, "But I am keeping an eye on you James Potter."

Everyone agreed that Molly and Arthur Weasley should be informed but it was up to Harry to tell the Weasley children. Right now only a few people in the Ministry were aware that Harry was the accusing party. With any luck Harry's identity would be kept confidential...although they were prepared for the worst nonetheless.

Once the meeting was over several members wanted to check in on Harry, especially Bill but Sirius and Remus insisted that Harry needed his rest. When everyone finally cleared out, the tired Marauders once again took up their shifts of staying by Harry's bedside. They had cast monitoring charms around Harry's room for the meeting but an hour was different from an entire night. There was also the fact that Harry's nightmares didn't normally start until after midnight but everyone felt that it was better to be safe than sorry.

The following morning Harry woke with a wince. His scar was throbbing in pain. Opening his eyes, Harry saw Remus' blurry figure sleeping on the opposite side of the bed, on top of the mountain of blankets that Harry had gathered from being ill. Before he could think anything else of the presence of one of his guardians, a wave of pain seared through his scar forcing Harry to roll onto his stomach and bury his face in his pillow to muffle his cry. He wanted nothing more than to pound his head into something hard to knock himself out so he couldn't feel the pain.

A muffled cry was coming from where James was trying to suffocate himself with the pillow.

"James?" Mrs. Potter asked worried.

Lily patted James' back and gently took the pillow away. "You have to understand Mr. Potter, this tendency of Harry's of not asking for help when help is right next to him is very frustrating. And James here has always had poor self-restraint."

"So true," Ms. Potter and Sirius said together.

"Excuse me? Poor self-restraint? You three are accusing me of poor self-restraint?" James asked bewildered and first pointed at Sirius, "Locked up in Azkaban because he just had to go mental on Wormtail instead of telling Dumbledore what happened," then pointed at Lily, "do I need to remind us all of a little thing called the "pumpkin juice incident" when I *accidentally* spilled juice on you at breakfast and ended up with purple skin for three days?" and then finally at his mother, "Oh, yes, and poor dad still has a slight limp on cold days from that time he called grandma overbearing when you had asked what he didn't like about your mother and promised to not overreact. I'd call hexing your husband overreaction."

"I have no idea what he is talking about," Lily said.

"Me neither," Mrs. Potter brushed some invisible lint from her robe.

"Padfoot, it's your turn," Remus pointed out.

"Why? I know I have no self-restraint, which doesn't change the fact that James hasn't any either," Sirius said flatly shrugging.

A gentle hand touched his back. "Harry?" Remus' voice quietly asked. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry turned his head and looked at Remus, unable to hide the pain he was in from his face.

"It hurts," he said with a wavering voice. "He's angry, really angry. Nagini failed; everyone's failed. He wants...he wants..." He could feel the pain increasing and had to bite back crying out.

"What does he want?" Remus prodded.

"I don't know!" Harry cried in frustration, his eyes closing tightly as started to rub his forehead. It was the truth. He couldn't explain how he knew what he did but he couldn't figure out what Voldemort actually wanted. "I just know he wants it for answers and it has

something to do with me. Why? Why is he so obsessed with me? I'm nothing special! I—I'm just me! And why now? The attack was days ago!"

"Because he is a psychopath with serious issues," Remus offered.

The other four burst out laughing.

"That's one way of putting it," Lily chuckled.

Remus started to gently rub Harry's back in an attempt to calm Harry down. "I know it's maddening, cub," he said softly. "Just try to think of something else. It'll pass. Try not to think of the pain or what Voldemort wants. Think about Quidditch. Can you do that?"

"Quidditch always help," James said simply and Mrs. Potter muttered something that sounded like "stupid Potter curse."

Harry slowly nodded and concentrated on flying through the air on his Firebolt, trying to catch the Snitch. For a few minutes nothing happened but eventually Harry could feel the pain slowly decreasing. Once it was down to a mere annoyance, Harry felt his body finally relax. In the absence of pain, Harry once again felt exhausted but he didn't want to go back to sleep. He had slept through the past few days and didn't want to sleep through another. Opening his eyes, Harry once again saw Remus' face and smiled. "Thanks Moony," Harry said gratefully.

Remus smiled and sat up so he was leaning against the headboard. "And what have we learned, cub?" he asked with a grin.

Harry looked up at Remus and shrugged. "Whenever my scar hurts, think of Quidditch," he said as he subconsciously rubbed his scar. He was really starting to hate this connection he had to Voldemort although he had to admit that if he didn't have it, Mr. Weasley could be dead. It was an annoyance and it made him ill but if it saved the lives of those he cared about then it made everything worth it, right?

Remus let out a laugh. "That wasn't what I had in mind," he said candidly. "I was referring to your habit of suffering in silence. I was right here, cub. I wouldn't have minded if you woke me when your scar started hurting. That's what I'm here for you know."

Remus took his little list and scratched something off it satisfied.

"What's that?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"We haven't been able to read it, but every now and then Moony writes something there while muttering," James explained.

"It's a list of things we have to talk with Harry about!" Remus said annoyed.

"I knew that!" Sirius said proudly. "I even wrote on it myself."

"Well done Sirius, that is very mature of you," Mrs. Potter praised and Sirius looked at her horrified.

"Mrs. Potter, don't do that to the poor boy," Lily said biting back a smile. "Now he'll have nightmares."

Harry shrugged. "You looked tired," he said honestly. "I've had scar headaches before. This one just came on a lot—er—faster and harder than some of the others." Silence filled the room. Harry felt a hand running through his hair and reflexively closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. Running fingers through Harry's hair had been a comforting motion that Sirius had been doing for years and Remus had picked up on it since it was always a reliable way to calm Harry down. "Remus?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Harry?" Remus asked; his amusement showing in his voice.

"Why are you amused Moony?"

"Why can't you be quiet so Mrs. P can read Padfoot?"

"Do you think it's selfish of me not to want this connection to Voldemort?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"NO!" five cries were heard.

"I mean, I know I helped with Mr. Weasley and everything but...but there has to be a better way, right? I can still see Mr. Weasley on the floor, bleeding. He's been so angry lately, I've felt it. I don't want to feel what he's feeling. I—I don't like what it's doing to me."

Remus slid an arm underneath Harry's shoulder and pulled the teen closer so he could wrap both arms around him. "I don't think you're being selfish, Harry," he said sincerely. "I really wish you would have told us how much your scar had been bothering you. We'll talk to Dumbledore and find a solution, I promise, but from now on, no more secrets, all right? Padfoot and I can't help you unless you talk to us."

Harry nodded, his head now resting on Remus' chest. He knew that there was a double meaning in Remus' words. Remus was referring to all of the secrets Harry had been keeping lately, not just his pain from Voldemort. There had been so many secrets that Harry had begun to lose track of what he had told who so to keep everything straight he had stopped telling anyone anything. He had allowed his fear to overpower him. He should have said something, protested in some way, but he was more worried about the Order than doing what was right.

The silence dragged on. Harry knew Remus was waiting for him to say something. Sometimes Remus was too patient for his own good.

"I know, Harry!" Remus said in a suffering tone. "These two wouldn't try half the stuff they try if I wasn't so patient with them," he said pointing at the other two grinning Marauders.

"How did the meeting go last night?" Harry asked at last.

Remus let out a chuckle. "Well, we had several offers of cursing Umbridge into insanity," he said candidly. "I think Alastor and Kingsley were prepared to resort to Muggle violence. Last night I think Dumbledore, Sirius and I realized how much everyone in the Order cares about you, Harry. It was all Sirius and I could do to stop them from coming up here to check on you and I have a good feeling we will be seeing quite a few of them in the next few days...including Bill and Molly."

Harry instantly looked up at Remus nervously. The Weasleys know?

"Bill was here last night," Remus clarified. "We can't hide this from Molly and Arthur, not when the rest of the Order knows. I know you don't want the attention, cub, and we've told the Order as much. Dumbledore was rather insistent that at the moment, you need your space. On the other hand, you can't hide in this place forever. You can't hide from those who care about you, including your friends."

"Couldn't agree more," Remus said puffing his chest.

Sirius, Lily and James ogled him and then burst out laughing.

"I happen to agree with Remus," Mrs. Potter said disapprovingly.

"But mum," James said through his laughter. "He agreed with himself!"

Letting out a sigh, Harry slowly sat up, ignoring the small wave of dizziness that abruptly hit him. "Can we please not talk about this anymore?" he asked softly. "I know I messed up. I know I have problems. Professor Umbridge made it her mission to point out every single one during detention."

Remus gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "That wasn't what I meant, Harry," he said gently. "Whatever Umbridge said to you was a lie, remember that. I was referring to the fact that you tend to take everything on yourself instead of allowing others to help you. You're friends had no idea what was going on except that you were receiving an overabundance of unfair detentions. How did you manage keeping everything to yourself for so long?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "The thought of a break away from Hogwarts was usually enough," he admitted.

There was a loud thud outside the door followed by a crash. Both Harry and Remus rolled their eyes and let out a sigh. They knew who was awake and making their way to Harry's room. "Good morning, Tonks!" they shouted at the same time.

"I'm okay!" Tonks shouted back causing both Harry and Remus to laugh. The woman could be so predictable sometimes.

"Oh, is that little Nymphadora?" Mrs. Potter cooed. "She is so adorable."

"Some say adorable," James said, "Some say menace."

"We already know which you prefer James," Remus scolded.

"He does have a point though," Sirius agreed.

A moment later she entered Harry's room with a sheepish grin on her face, wearing a pair of baby blue pajama pants and a form fitting white shirt which made her short, spiky purple hair stand out more than usual. "Wotcher Harry!" she exclaimed as she jumped on the bed. "Wotcher Remus! So, what do you two have planned for today? Decorating, wrapping presents...cooking?"

"Oh my, little Nymphadora jumps in a bed with two men quite easily," James teased and was pelted by three pillows.

"Oi, that's my baby cousin you're talking about!"

"James Potter don't be rude!" Mrs. Potter scolded.

"Yeah, what Mrs. P said!" Lily said sternly.

Remus let out a snort. "Tonks has been missing you cooking, Harry," he clarified. "Apparently my cooking isn't good enough for her." He then turned his attention to Tonks. "Maybe you should test Dobby's cooking, Tonks. If I know that house elf like I think I do, I have a good feeling that he wouldn't allow Harry anywhere near the kitchen."

Tonks seemed to ponder the comment for a minute then smiled. "I might just do that," she said then hopped off the bed. "I'll have Dobby bring something up for you two lazybones."

Harry and Remus watched as Tonks left the room with what appeared to be a bounce to her step. "She is too perky in the morning," Harry said bluntly. "Are you sure she's related to Sirius?"

"Maybe she's adopted," James pondered.

"Must be," Remus agreed. "Unless it's Christmas morning there is no way Sirius gets out of bed before four in the afternoon willingly."

"I sense people are making fun of me!" Sirius said through greeted teeth.

Remus let out a laugh

"Moony! You're laughing at my expense!" Sirius cried.

"Is there a better way to laugh?" Remus asked straight faced.

as he pulled Harry into a fierce embrace, catching Harry by surprise. "We really missed you, cub," he said with a chuckle. "It just isn't the same around the big old place without you." He relaxed his arms and let Harry sit completely upright again. "Do you think we should go wake up Padfoot? It could be fun."

"Don't bother," a sleepy Sirius said from the doorway. He hid a yawn as he stumbled into Harry's room and collapsed on the bed, next to Harry. "Morning Pronglet, Moony," he mumbled. "What is everyone doing up so early?"

"Finding ways to annoy you, Padfoot," Remus answered innocently.

Sirius glared at Remus who smiled sheepishly back.

"It is our mission in life, you know, although Tonks did bring up an interesting question. What do you want to do today, Harry? You probably should take it easy for the next few days and it probably wouldn't be smart to leave the house. We could play fetch with Padfoot—"

"What?" Sirius hissed and Remus gave him a cheeky grin. "I do not play fetch!"

"Fetch!" James cried as he threw a pillow at Sirius who turned and caught it before it hit his face. "See, you do play fetch."

Lily smacked James head and said biting back a laugh, "Don't be mean."

"—hey!" Sirius exclaimed but made no effort to move from his comfortable spot. "Padfoot does not play fetch! Padfoot does not need a girlfriend! And Padfoot does not need little puppies running around the house! So everyone just get off Padfoot's back!"

"Someone's *touchy*," Lily said lifting her eyebrows and biting her lips. Sirius just narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms.

Harry glanced at Remus nervously before slightly moving towards his secondary guardian. He had never intended on offending Sirius but apparently he had which was odd. Sirius usually took everything with a laugh. Hearing Sirius sound irritable wasn't something Harry was used to. "Er—that's okay," Harry said softly. "I—I need to go back to Hogwarts." Both Sirius and Remus looked at Harry in disbelief. "Er—my trunk's still there with—er—things I sort of need."

"Dobby can bring your trunk," Sirius said as he sat up and stole a glance at Remus before returning his gaze to Harry. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Pronglet. I didn't mean it like it sounded...well, maybe I did. You see, you weren't the only one who's mentioned puppies around this place—" He glared at Remus before softening his gaze at Harry—"except that you were a little more tactful in your approach. I think Moony wants to be an uncle again."

"Aw Moony," James jumped on the bed and threw his arm around Remus. "Do you want more cubs? Don't worry, will get Padfoot a nice girl."

"Now Sirius, I didn't mean anything by it and you know that," Remus said in exasperation.

"You tell me all the time that I should find female wolf to howl at the moon with. How is what I said any different? It isn't. I don't understand why you are taking this so personal."

"Yes he does," Remus grumbled. "Annoying as hell."

Harry really didn't want to be in the middle of this conversation, especially one that appeared to have been going on for a while. Hearing his guardians talking about their love lives or lack thereof reminded Harry of why things were as they were. Sirius really wouldn't be able to go out without attracting attention because of his celebrity status and everyone knew Remus was a werewolf thanks to Rita Skeeter's articles. At the moment, Harry figured his guardians were feeling incredibly trapped.

"They are trapped and it's because of you."

"No we're not!" Sirius cried.

"Remus, did you write in that list something about talking to Harry about this blaming himself thing that he has going on?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"I have it written loads of times and even underlined it," Remus said showing the list.

"It's really not Remus' fault," Lily said annoyed. "It's that good for nothing, envious, pompous b- er – sister of mine's fault."

Harry instantly grabbed his head and closed his eyes as he tried to shake the statement out. He had no idea where that came from but pushed it off as to a reminder of what Professor Umbridge had been trying to make him believe for over a month now. That had to be it. His scar was only a dull ache like it normally was so it wasn't related to Voldemort. There was also the fact that the voice didn't sound anything like Voldemort's or anyone else that he knew.

"Excuse me? He's hearing voices?" Lily asked worried. "Make him tell you!" she cried as she grabbed Sirius and shook him.

"Help here! Little help!" Sirius cried.

"Lily is extremely correct, Harry tell you're guardians," Mrs. Potter said sternly to the book not paying attention to the struggling Sirius.

"But what voice is that?" James asked worried and Remus shrugged desperately. Sirius was still trying to pry the deranged girl from him but was having no help at all.

A hand grabbed Harry's left shoulder while another rested on his back. Opening his eyes, Harry saw a somewhat blurry version of his guardians looking at him, their dispute instantly forgotten. He blinked a few times then felt his glasses being slid into place, allowing everything to finally come into focus. "Er—sorry," Harry said uncomfortably. "I don't know what just happened."

Sirius and Remus carefully helped Harry lie back down. "Is your scar hurting again?" Remus asked patiently and let out a relieved sigh when Harry shook his head, ignoring the look of surprise on Sirius' face. "Just take it easy, Harry. You *have* been rather ill the past few days. Dobby can bring your trunk here and we can go from there." He looked over at Sirius. "You're recovery is what's important now."

"Yes," Lily said relieved as she finally let Sirius go. "Thank you Moony!"

"Moony's right," Sirius said with a smile. "Don't mind us, Harry. We just know how to push each other's buttons extremely well." Sirius glanced down at Harry's right hand and looked at the words engraved on the back of it. "Does it hurt?" he asked softly.

Harry shook his head as he closed his eyes, not wanting to see the looks of sympathy from his guardians. "It usually stops hurting after two days," he said truthfully. "It looks worse than it actually is, trust me." Harry rolled onto his stomach and hid his hands underneath his pillow. Deep down Harry knew the holidays would most likely revolve around Professor Umbridge in some form or another. That didn't mean he had to like it.

"Don't do that, Harry," Remus said firmly. "Don't try to ignore what happened because you don't want to anger us. You tried to do that with Cedric's death and it didn't work, remember? We need to talk about this. You need to face this."

Harry groaned in frustration. The entire topic was getting old rather fast. How many times did he have to hear that Professor Umbridge was lying to him? He knew that. He had always known that. "I have," Harry said in annoyance. "She was wrong to do what she did and I was

wrong to keep it to myself. End of story. Both of you and Professor Dumbledore have told me as much repeatedly. There's nothing else to talk about."

"If that's true then why are you having nightmares about us sending you back to the Dursleys?" Sirius asked instantly as he wrapped an arm around Harry. "We want to help you through this, Pronglet, but you have to let us. You have to talk to us. If you don't want to talk about this anymore right now, we'll accept that. We know you understand Umbridge was lying but there's a fair chance that you don't completely believe it yet. If you start to have doubts again, please come to us, all right?"

"Well done Sirius," Lily said approvingly.

Sirius looked at her warily but nodded his thanks nonetheless.

Harry nodded. He could live with that. At the moment he didn't need endless talks because he did believe that Sirius and Remus would never do any of the things that Professor Umbridge claimed they would. At the moment, he was fine although there probably would be times when he did have doubts, most likely after a nightmare as much as Harry hated to admit it. When that time came, Harry made a mental vow to talk to his guardians. It was probably the only way he would keep his sanity.

"Finally!" James sighed.

Remus wasn't joking when he said there would be a lot of visitors. Throughout the next few days it seemed that nearly every member of the Order stopped by for a visit, some even more than once. Mrs. Weasley and Bill were the first to stop by on Saturday afternoon. Bill sat and joked around with Harry while Mrs. Weasley annoyed Sirius and Remus to no end by checking and re-checking to make sure they were doing everything necessary to help Harry. Somewhere between the nagging and the joking Harry learned that Mr. Weasley was fine however his wound wasn't healing as fast as they had hoped. Both Bill and Mrs. Weasley thanked Harry for saving Mr. Weasley's life, something that made Harry feel incredibly uneasy. He still remembered being the snake. He remembered what it felt like to be that snake. It...it just felt wrong to be thanked for it.

The presence of Dobby seemed to be a mixed blessing. Dobby had brought back Harry's trunk and wand from Hogwarts with a snap of the fingers, angering Kreacher immensely. Kreacher

clearly wasn't welcoming Dobby with opening arms and made a point to grumble about Dobby's inexcusable behavior. Kreacher didn't approve of how Dobby continuously pestered Harry concerning if he was hungry or not, if he was warm enough or if he needed anything. When Kreacher finally cornered Dobby, the Hogwarts elf proudly stood his ground, claiming he was 'Mr. Harry Potter's elf and was here to aid in Mr. Harry Potter's recovery'.

It was a rare occasion that Harry was left alone, even throughout the night. Harry's nightmares had decreased dramatically and had altered slightly but they were still present. Now, instead of Sirius and Remus declaring that they didn't want Harry anymore, Harry's nightmares consisted of Professor Umbridge aligning with Vernon Dursley in order to 'make Harry see the truth'. Sirius and Remus would quickly wake Harry the moment he woke them by shouting in his sleep and assure him that he was safe, calming Harry down immediately.

Christmas morning arrived quickly and was the first morning that Sirius was awake before everyone else in the household. Entering Harry's room in his Animagus form, Sirius noticed that Harry was sleeping on his side with his back facing the door. He carefully jumped on the bed and crawled between Harry and Remus, careful not to wake his friend who was sleeping on his back. As soon as he was close enough, Sirius touched Harry's face with his wet nose and pulled away, causing the teen to swat away nothing. Sirius tried again and nearly jumped in surprise when an arm wrapped around his neck and held him like he was a stuffed animal.

"Aw," the two women in the room cooed while Remus and James burst out laughing. Sirius just glared at everyone.

Not wanting to wake Harry up, Sirius pawed at Remus who awoke with a start and turned to see a sleeping teen and a helpless large dog. Remus instantly covered his mouth to hide a laugh before pulling out his wand and summoning a camera. What made the entire situation funny was the look on Padfoot's place. It was clear Sirius didn't like his current position but wasn't about to move and wake Harry up.

With a bright flash, Harry opened his eyes and looked at Remus in confusion, blinking a few time before realizing that his arm was wrapped around something furry which was strange. He didn't remember Sirius coming in last night. "Morning, Moony," Harry said sleepily as he let go of the big black dog. "Morning Midnight."

With a *pop* Sirius transformed back into his human form. "Happy Christmas, Pronglet," he said happily then glanced over at Remus. "Were you two up late last night?"

"We were talking about a study group he's a part of," Remus said with a grin. "The Defense Association is what they call themselves. Harry's a member of the Council that plans the meetings and instructs others in the ways of Defense. It appears that our little Marauder has been secretly defying the Ministry for quite some time."

Sirius stared at Harry causing him to hide underneath his duvet. "Let me get this straight," he said as he pulled back the duvet to reveal Harry's nervous face. "You've been causing mischief for months and you didn't tell us!" Sirius pulled Harry into his arms and hugged him tightly. "I am so proud of you!"

"Sirius Black! You are supposed to teach him to behave not encourage mischief!" Mrs. Potter scolded.

"Really Mrs. P, what are the chances of that happening?" Lily asked.

He loosened his hold and looked at Harry with a grin. "So tell me everything. What's this Council you're a member of? What have you been teaching everyone? How did you manage without anyone finding out about it?"

For the next half hour Harry explained the D.A. to Sirius with Remus offering comments here and there. He explained the concept of the Council and was surprised when Sirius and Remus approved of the idea and the reasons for its existence (at least the reasons Harry gave them). Harry neglected to voice any of the reasons involving Professor Umbridge's grudge against him. The reason he gave his guardians was so all houses could have a part in deciding what was taught. It wasn't a lie but it hadn't been the exact truth either.

Soon enough Tonks was awake and demanded that it was time to open presents. Harry shared a look with his guardians before following his honorary aunt downstairs. There were just some times when he didn't understand the Black family.

"Then you're better off than me Harry," Sirius said. "I never understand the Black family!"

Dobby had taken the liberty of decorating the living room, including a tree that had a mountain of presents underneath it. Harry sat down on the sofa with Sirius sitting to his right and Remus sitting to his left while Tonks hurried to the tree and started handing out presents.

It seemed that every member of the Order had gotten Harry something along with several members of the teaching staff. Tonks had given him a small, fully functional model of a Firebolt that flew around the room while they opened presents along with a spare wand holster since his current one was starting to show its wear and tear. Sirius had given a new

winter cloak with the Potter, Black and Lupin family crests embedded in the lining, Remus had given Harry a watch that automatically adjusted the time to where you were and used magic instead of batteries to operate, and together the Marauders had given Harry a set of books entitled 'Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts', something they had intended would help Harry with his training but figured he could now use them for his 'study group'.

Harry had given Tonks a crystal mirror that he had spotted at Hogsmeade a few weeks ago that was charmed to be unbreakable, something that Tonks had been grateful for since she dropped it in surprise the moment she picked it up out of the package. Sirius and Remus had been difficult to shop for this year. For his guardians, Harry had managed to convince an artist at Hogsmeade to create a magical painting that consisted of a forest and three animals: a wolf, a big black dog and a stag. With all of the charms and time it took to make the painting the way Harry wanted it, it had cost him quite a bit of money but he thought it was worth it.

"Aw," Lily cooed. "That's so sweet."

As his guardians opened the large package, Harry couldn't help feeling his stomach tighten. What if they didn't like it?

"Harry, we would love anything you gave us," Remus said.

James looked at him and bit back a laugh, "Moony, you just sounded like my parents when I was little and made them Christmas presents."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Mrs. Potter asked indignantly, "I always loved your little gifts. They show how thoughtful you were."

"Really mom, you loved *all* my gifts? Like the mud pie, did you eat it? Or that cooked spaghetti with sauce hat I made you, never seen you wear it."

"Well, hum, those were very special gifts that I keep in a very special place," Mrs. Potter tried to defend herself.

"Uh, huh," Sirius chuckled. "The trash."

"Yeah, but Harry is fifteen. And he gave us an awesome gift, not a spaghetti and sauce hat!" Remus huffed crossing his arms.

"He does have a point," Lily nodded.

"Well, sorry! I was four!" James cried.

Pushing the thought out of his mind, Harry saw the painting of just the forest at the moment. It looked exactly like the forest at Hogwarts, something that both of his guardians also noticed. From the looks on their faces it was clear that they were slightly confused but trying desperately to hide it.

"You need to activate it," Harry said with a grin. *"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."*

The painting instantly came to life. The branches started to sway as if they were being blown by wind. A moon appeared to rise from the trees, shining moonlight over the previously dark and dreary painting. Sirius and Remus watched as three animals came out of the forest. The large black dog barked happily and started to chase his tail, the wolf looked up at the moon and howled and the stag stood proudly with what could only be described as mischievous look on his face if that was possible before he used his antlers to poke the dog in the butt, causing the Grim-like creature to yelp then growl at the stag while the wolf shook his head in exasperation. The three animals started to chase each other, hiding behind the trees in an attempt to get the advantage before pouncing.

Harry started to fidget nervously. Sirius and Remus weren't doing anything, just staring at the painting. The lack of verbal communication made Harry wonder if he had stepped over the line with the gift. After another ten minutes, Sirius and Remus finally pulled their eyes away from the painting and looked at Harry with tears in their eyes. Harry bit his lower lip and started to apologize when he found himself in painfully tight embrace with his guardians.

"Where did you ever find such a thing?" Sirius asked in a wavering voice. "H—how could it grasp our forms and our personalities so perfectly?"

"Because Harry knows you well by now," Lily said happily.

"I—er—I had it made," Harry said as Sirius and Remus finally pulled back and looked at Harry in amazement. "Both of you have told me so many stories about your times in the forest that I thought that this would cheer you both up when you needed it. Is—er—is it okay?"

A bark from the painting could be heard which made everyone laugh. "I think you have your answer, cub," Remus said with a smile. "This is the greatest present we have ever received and I think I know exactly where to put it." He stood up and with a flick of his wand had the

painting of the Marauders replacing the Black Family Crest above the fireplace. "There," he said proudly as he sat back down on the sofa next to Harry. "Right where it should be."

Sirius sat down in his previous seat, wrapped an arm around Harry and pulled him close. "I could watch it all day," he said with a smile. "I can't believe how much Prongs is like Prongs. He actually used his antlers as a weapon quite a few times when he wanted me to pay attention."

"Yes," Sirius said rubbing his butt. "It hurts!"

James blew him a cheeky kiss.

Harry looked up at the painting and noticed that 'Padfoot' and 'Moony' were resting on the ground while Prongs stood over them, as if he were protecting them. The thought of his father looking out for his guardians made Harry smile as he tilted his head to the right so it was resting against Sirius' shoulder.

James puffed his chest, "Yes, I am everyone's protector."

The other four occupants of the room stared at him with looks that clearly said that they thought he was out of his mind.

Closing his eyes, Harry listened as 'Padfoot' barked and 'Moony' howled. He had to admit that it did sound like the real thing.

A hand ruffled Harry's hair. "Not yet, Harry," Remus said in amusement. "We still have one more present for you."

Harry opened his eyes and looked over at Remus in confusion. He saw Tonks hand over a slim box wrapped in red and gold paper to Remus who in turn handed it over to him. After an encouraging nod from Sirius, Harry carefully unwrapped the present and opened the box to see a gold chain with three circular golden pendants on it, each one with a different animal engraved on it. The first charm had a stag on it, the second had a dog that looked similar to Midnight and the third had a wolf.

"These are legacy pendants, Harry," Remus said softly. "By putting this on, you are accepting the role as an heir to the Potter, Lupin, and Black families." Harry instantly looked up at his guardians ready to protest. "Harry, you know that I can't have children," Remus said before Harry could object. "Whether Sirius has children later or not doesn't matter. Any child he

would have would look to you as an older brother.” Remus pulled out a chain out from under his shirt that appeared to have a similar charm on it. “Sirius has one also,” Remus continued. “We charmed the pendants to create a link between them for your protection. If you are ever in danger, our pendants will let us know.”

Lily and James hugged Remus and Sirius fiercely, “Thank you!” they both cried.

Mrs. Potter dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and whispered a “thank you” too.

Sirius took the chain with the pendants on it and put it on Harry. “I know you see us as fathers, Pronglet, and we see you like a son,” he said sincerely. “So let us be the adults here and do something that protects you. It’s the least we can do.”

Harry touched the pendants that were strangely warm against his skin. If he concentrated he could almost feel the link between the charms linking his pendants to those his guardians were wearing. He then looked at his guardians and couldn’t help but smile. If he ever needed a reminder that his guardians loved him he only had to look as far as the gold chain that was now around his neck. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “Thank you for everything.”

The occupants of Number 12, Grimmauld Place had to agree that it was turning out to be an extremely memorable Christmas.

“Aw,” the two women cooed.

After a large lunch thanks to Dobby, Harry, Sirius, Remus and Tonks flooded over to St. Mungo’s to visit Mr. Weasley. Sirius and Remus had been reluctant to give into Harry’s inquiries to see the man but knew that Harry wouldn’t stop asking about Mr. Weasley’s condition until Harry saw Mr. Weasley himself. Before leaving, Harry reflexively pulled his sleeve over his right hand to hide his marred skin. He had a feeling that if Mr. Weasley saw it endless questions that he didn’t want to answer again would be asked.

Remus had given Harry an overview how the wizarding world varied from the muggle world in regards to medical care. There were no doctors, only healers.

“Well, they kind of are the wizard doctors,” Lily said.

"I don't think the right thing is to say that there are no doctors but more like there are no nurses," Remus mused. "Since the healers can do everything a nurse does with a wave of his or her wand. Madam Pomfrey for instance is a full healer whereas muggle schools don't have full doctors on staff they have nurses.

"It's more like they are a blend then, a healer is both a nurse and a doctor," Lily said thoughtfully.

"Have you two stopped pondering the ways the muggle world and magical world are different? Can we go back to *Harry*?" Sirius asked annoyed.

Performing surgery was a last resort when every sort of magic failed. It was almost like they stayed away from muggle ways because they were muggle ways.

"No," Mrs. Potter said shaking her head. "It's more because they are messy. Why open someone up when you can cleanly wave a wand and have the same result?"

Sirius was bashing his head on the pillow.

Although Harry really couldn't complain about the way healers did their job since he had his fair share of injuries healed in a fraction of the time it would take if it was healed the muggle way.

Mr. Weasley was on the first floor, the Dia Llewellyn Ward which was second door on the right according to Mrs. Weasley. Harry nervously followed Remus with Sirius at his side and Tonks behind through the double doors and along the narrow corridor. After climbing a flight of stairs they entered the Creature-Induced Injuries corridor and took the second door on the right. Being surrounded by his family prevented Harry from really seeing anything but he figured it was probably for the best. He hated when strangers stared at him and had a feeling that people here weren't any different.

Remus glanced over his shoulder at Harry and smiled before pushing the door open. Harry hesitated for a moment, not sure if he really wanted to see the condition Mr. Weasley was in. A gentle hand on his back and a reassuring smile from Sirius was all he needed to regain his confidence and enter. Sunlight filled the room, revealing three patients in the ward. Harry could easily pick out Mr. Weasley who was lying in the bed at the far end of the ward next to a window. Currently his only guest was Mrs. Weasley.

The moment Mr. Weasley noticed Harry a bright smile appeared on his face. "Harry!" he said happily. "Come here, son!" Harry approached the bed and was surprisingly pulled into an

embrace nearly causing him to lose his balance. "How are you holding up? Bill told me everything. I can't believe you had to go through all that."

Not good! Change the subject and change it quickly. "I'm fine, Mr. Weasley," Harry said as he pried himself out of Mr. Weasley's arms. "Are you okay? I tried to stop it, I really did."

Mr. Weasley smiled as he gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "I know you did," he said sincerely. "From what I hear you spent quite a few days sick in bed because of it." He glanced at the scar on Harry's forehead with a look of sympathy on his face. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Harry. If I hadn't fallen asleep in that corridor—"

"—Voldemort still would have tried something, Arthur," Sirius said quietly but firmly, ignoring the flinches from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley as the mention of the 'forbidden' name. It was clear from the look on Sirius' face that the Animagus wanted to prevent Mr. Weasley from saying something he shouldn't. "How's the wound healing?"

"I have to say Sirius, except that encouraging mischief episode I am very well impressed on how you matured," Mrs. Potter said happily.

Sirius started shaking and grabbing his robes with his fist and turning the fabric around. James and Remus were quickly at his side soothing the poor distressed boy.

"Mom, you have to stop that! Poor Paddy's heart can't take so much dishonor. Don't say the M word again!"

Mrs. Potter and Lily both rolled her eyes.

"Slowly," Mr. Weasley grumbled. "They've tried everything yet it still bleeds every time the bandages are removed. They even tried a muggle procedure called stitches but Molly—er—didn't approve and demanded for them to be removed."

"With good reason," Mrs. Weasley said firmly. "I can't believe you allowed a Healer to do that to you. You and your muggle obsession, Arthur Weasley!"

"Now, there I agree with the author about them not wanting to use a method just because it's Muggle. I mean, if the magical way isn't working why not try the Muggle way?" Mrs. Potter pinched her lips disapprovingly.

Harry glanced at his guardians and Tonks nervously, not sure if this was a discussion he wanted to be present for. Remus smiled at Harry and approached the hospital bed. "So, how are the children?" Remus asked casually. "Dumbledore said that Ron and Ginny took the news rather hard."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley both let out a sigh and turned to Remus. "I think it was the collection of events that caused them to react so severely," Mr. Weasley admitted as he glanced at Harry. "Ron told me what happened after Harry's vision. According to him, you were extremely ill, Harry, and your scar was bleeding. Then, you disappear in the middle of the night and all Dumbledore would say was 'Harry's recovering at home'. It didn't help that Ron had relayed everything to Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George. The five of them can be quite a handful when they want to find out information." Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat as if she were warning Mr. Weasley of something. "Anyways," Mr. Weasley said quickly, "When they realized that you were ill because you saw what happened to me...well, I guess it was just too much to handle."

"It's understandable," Lily said. "I mean, imagine having your friend go through that and then not being able to see for yourself that he is fine."

"Yeah, after all, Harry wanted to see Mr. Weasley to be sure he was fine," Remus reasoned.

Harry had to admit that with everything going on he hadn't thought about what his friends were going through in seeing him the way they had. In truth he had been avoiding the topic because he knew it was inevitable when everyone learned about the hearing concerning Professor Umbridge. He knew Hermione and the Weasleys were going to be furious that he hid it all from them. "They're fine now, right?" Harry asked at last.

"Wouldn't you be furious if a friend of yours was hurting and hiding it from you?" James asked glaring at Remus and Sirius. "How can you help if you don't know?"

"Oh, James," Mrs. Potter said. "It's not that easy or rational. He was a scared boy," and by the way Mrs. Potter was glancing at Remus and Sirius it was clear that she was not only talking about Harry. Remus and Sirius on the other hand made a very good job of pretending they didn't get the subtle hints.

Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it, dear," she said kindly. "Just concentrate on yourself for now. From what I understand Dumbledore is pushing for the hearing to be held soon. The children will understand that you have a lot on your mind. If you

want to talk to them, feel free to fire-call anytime you need to." Mrs. Weasley pulled Harry into an embrace. "If you need anything, dear, just let us know."

"Er—okay," Harry said uncomfortably. He really didn't know what else to say. He doubted that he would contact the Weasleys since they had enough to deal with as it was.

Their visit was cut short by a Healer who wanted to check Mr. Weasley's wound. Thankful for small favors, Harry bid goodbye with wishes of Mr. Weasley recovering soon. He had to admit that he felt better after seeing Mr. Weasley so much like his old self and nothing like what he had seen in his vision although the fact that Mr. Weasley wasn't healing did leave Harry unsettled. The attack had been more than five days ago and the wound hadn't healed yet?

Leaving the ward, the three wizards and one witch left for the fireplace they had entered when a shout of 'HARRY!' caught everyone's attention. Turning around, Harry was surprised to see Neville Longbottom running toward him. Naturally Harry thought the worse had happened. After all, why would Neville be at St. Mungo's on Christmas unless something bad happened?

"Harry!" Neville said with a relieved smile. "How are you? Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey wouldn't tell us anything! Everyone was so worried after you went home! You're better now right?"

"Poor Neville," Lily said. "He must be thinking the worse."

"Why?" Sirius asked.

"The last time he saw Harry he was sick and bleeding and now he sees him at St. Mungo's," Lily explained. "I'd be thinking he had been admitted."

"I'm fine, Neville," Harry said truthfully. He really didn't want to start this conversation again but knew that he better start getting used to it because everyone at Hogwarts was going to be doing the same thing. "Er—not to sound rude or anything but what are you doing here? Is your grandmother all right? Are you all right?"

Neville suddenly looked nervous. "Gran's fine," he said uncomfortably. "I—er—well—I'm visiting my parents. They—er—have been here for quite some time."

Harry felt Sirius squeeze his shoulder serving as a silent message not to press the issue. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," he said sincerely. "If you ever need to talk or anything..."

"Neville!" exclaimed Mrs. Longbottom as she approached, clearly upset. "You know better then to run off in this place!' She noticed Neville's companions and forced a smile. "Sirius Black and Remus Lupin," she said politely. "Neville has told me quite a bit about you two along with your charge." Mrs. Longbottom looked directly at Harry. "My Neville can't seem to tell me enough about you, Harry Potter. Your parents would certainly be proud of you."

"Mrs. Longbottom is scary," James said wisely.

"Oh, shush James," Mrs. Potter said. "Augusta is a very nice lady."

"She and mum are friends," James explained. "I always feel like I did something very wrong when she looks at me."

"Well, Augusta is a tad, er- how could I put it?" Mrs. Potter said.

"Intense," Remus offered.

"Yes, well. You could say that. She runs her household very firmly," Mrs. Potter said. "She had Frank a tad late for the Wizarding World. I think she was well into her thirties. They thought they wouldn't be able to have children and then they had Frank. So Augusta is a little overbearing on him. But I always thought she'd mellow with grandchildren after all it's not her responsibility to educate them, she would be able to spoil them."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said politely. "I'm sorry to hear about your son and daughter-in-law."

Mr. Longbottom turned to Neville. "You never told anyone about your parents and the sacrifice they made in the stand against You-Know-Who?"

"I think Harry has just put his foot in his mouth," Remus calmly said.

"What sacrifice, what happened to Frank?" James asked worried.

she asked confusion. "You should be proud of what they did, Neville. They didn't give their sanity so you can be ashamed of them."

"WHAT?" the five cried.

"Oh, my," Mrs. Potter said. "So Augusta is raising Neville too after losing Frank in a way. Oh, she must be twice as...*intense* with him."

Neville looked like he wanted to disappear. Harry quickly came to Neville's defense. "Please don't get the wrong idea, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry said quickly. "With people like Malfoy at school we've learned to keep our private lives private for our own sakes. There are quite a few students who feel the need to use the pasts of others for their own gain. Trust me, it happens quite often. I'm sure Neville wasn't ashamed. He just didn't want anyone using such a personal matter against him."

"Smart," Sirius said. "Can you imagine what the little git would do with that information?"

"He would be in heaven," James scowled.

Mrs. Longbottom let out a sigh and wrapped an arm around Neville. "I'm sorry, dear," she said gently. "In my age I forget many of the problems that came with being a teenager." Mrs. Longbottom looked at Sirius and Remus with a smile on her face. "You two have certainly done a fine job with this one, especially with all of the hardships recently."

"Thank you," Remus said with a polite nod. "If you'll excuse us, we should be on our way. Happy Christmas."

Harry bid farewell and followed Remus through the floo network back home. That night Harry learned the truth about Neville's parents. Sirius and Remus told the entire story of how the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Jr. tortured the Longbottoms into insanity right after Voldemort vanished from Godric's Hollow. It was hard to think how it would be like to have parents who didn't recognize you. At the moment Harry didn't know whether to envy Neville or feel sorry for him. Neville's parents were still alive but in reality they weren't the parents they should have been. No matter what, Harry learned today that he had more in common with Neville Longbottom than he ever realized.

"I think I would envy Neville," Lily said.

"Why?" James asked.

"It's like Harry said," she explained. "He still has them and you never know what healers will come up next. In our time there is no Wolfsbane. They could find a way to cure them. Neville has something Harry doesn't have, he has hope that maybe one day he'll get to have his parents back. Harry doesn't."

"Yeah, but that can also be tricky," Sirius said. "What if he lives his whole life hoping and nothing ever happens? They die before they can be cured. That would make the disappointment bigger."

"As long as he doesn't stop living because he is waiting for them, I don't think he'll suffer more if he hopes than if he resigns himself to their fate. I think that even if he says he is resigned deep down he still hopes and will suffer twice because he spent all that time resigned instead of hoping something better could happen. Then he'll feel guilty that maybe he didn't try enough because he was resigned. This way at least he'll know he did his best," Mrs. Potter said.

"I don't know," Remus shrugged. "I think it's a tough situation where there is no way of knowing what's best. Maybe it would have been kinder to them if they had died or maybe Lily is right and they can be cured. You have no way of knowing with these things and can just hope what you do is the best."

--

A/N- That was a depressing topic to end with. Well, here's to hoping things get cheery next chapter. Unfortunately, due to real life getting chaotic I haven't been able to write more than a few lines for next chapter, and in my dilemma of "should I make my readers wait for this one" or "should I risk delaying the next one" I decided to take the risk and hope I'll get more time to write this week.

Thank you all that read this. Huge thanks to my reviewers and let's cross our fingers.

Not mine.

Chapter 18

True Colors Revealed

The following morning Harry was awoken early to find Professor Dumbledore talking quietly with Sirius and Remus in the corner of his room. After hearing the reason for Dumbledore's presence, Harry wished he would have just fallen back asleep. As it turned out, Professor Dumbledore pulled some strings and had the hearing scheduled for the next day at eight in the morning. Harry would of course need to formally voice his complaints against Professor Umbridge which included retelling about the verbal abuse that she had put him through. Professor Dumbledore would be bringing his Pensieve as evidence and Harry would provide his right hand.

Since Harry was underage, it would be a closed hearing meaning that no reporters were allowed. Sirius, Remus, Tonks and Alastor Moody were allowed to be present due to Professor Dumbledore's request of protection for Harry.

"Well, at least Alastor will be there to protect Harry, Remy and Siri" Mrs. Potter beamed and Sirius and Remus gaped at her with their mouths hanging open in silent outrage at being the ones protected. "I wonder if I should invite him for a nice home cooked dinner to thank him," she pondered and James and Lily tried to hold their laughter both at the idea of Mrs. Potter thanking Moody for something he had no idea he would do and at the other two Marauders' outrage.

It didn't matter if the Ministry believed Voldemort was back or not. Harry Potter's presence at the Ministry was bound to attract attention that Harry really didn't want.

The day seemed to drag unimaginably. Sirius and Remus tried everything to take Harry's mind off of the impending hearing. They tried games of chess, picking out material that should be covered in D.A. meetings and light training. The distractions partially worked for a short time but Harry just couldn't calm his nerves. He knew he was in the right. He knew Umbridge was wrong but facing her and claming as much to the Ministry was a completely different story. Mostly he was afraid that no one would believe him regardless of the evidence.

After a sleepless night, the occupants of Black Manor were out of bed extremely early the next morning. Mad-Eye Moody arrived nearly two hours before the hearing, instructing everyone that it would be best to arrive early. To avoid delays, the floo network was their mode of transportation. Moody went first followed by Remus, Harry, Sirius and finally Tonks. They arrived in a long hallway, full of fireplaces. Harry had never seen so many in one place before.

Once everyone cast a 'Scourgify' on themselves to clean the soot they had acquired during travel, Harry found himself surrounded by the four adults. Moody was in front, Sirius was standing to his right, Remus to his left and Tonks was behind as a few wizards emerged from nearby fireplaces.

"See Mrs. P?" Sirius asked. "We are the ones doing the protection."

"Of course you are," Mrs. Potter said but the tone she used had Sirius feeling like a five-year-old that had just been praised for capturing his own teddy bear.

Sirius instantly rested a hand on Harry's shoulder as they started walking at a brisk but casual pace. Being completely surrounded blocked Harry's view but at the moment he was too nervous to even think that he was actually in the Ministry of Magic for the first time in his life. Perhaps once everything was over he would take in the sight.

Walking past a large fountain with golden, larger than life-size statues, a circular pool and glittering jets of water that shot up in the air, Harry could hear pops and cracks as witches and wizards Apparated in. Harry obediently followed Mad-Eye Moody to a desk underneath a sign saying Security near a set of golden gates at the far end of the hall. There was tired looking wizard in brown robes reading the Daily Prophet.

"Escorting a visitor who needs discretion," Moody growled. "His wand has already personalized and can't be touched by anyone but him."

The guard shifted his gaze from Moody to Remus and then to Sirius before looking back at Moody. "Follow me," he said standing up. He walked to a nearby room and moved aside; allowing Moody, Harry, Sirius and Remus enter before him. Tonks remained on guard outside the room. The security wizard approached Harry with a long golden, flexible rod in his hand. He passed the rod up and down Harry's front and back then looked over at Moody and nodded. "Mr. Potter, could you please show your wand?"

"You know, I think that search at the Ministry is very insulting!" James said.

"How so?" Lily, who had never been to the Ministry of Magic, asked.

"They make you hand your wand!" James cried. "They make you become unarmed in a place full of armed wizards and witches."

"No one is going to attack you there James," Mrs. Potter snorted.

"James does have a point," Remus shrugged. "Why does he have to trust them when they clearly don't trust him? I understand they have to have security and all but they should do it in a less aggressive way. A Wizard's wand is very personal."

With a flick of the wrist Harry had his wand in hand causing the security wizard to jump back in surprise. The teenager watched as the security wizard walked over to a nearby table and

picked up a brass instrument that looked like a set of scales but it only had one dish. After a glance at Sirius, Harry placed his wand in the dish and took a step back when the dish started to vibrate. A moment later a thin strip of parchment appeared out of the slit in the base.

The security wizard tore off the parchment and read what was written on it. "Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, used for four and a half years, correct?" he asked.

"Yes sir," Harry said nervously causing the security wizard to look at Harry in surprise before motioning for Harry to take his wand back. After re-holstering his wand, Harry let himself be directed out of the room as his guardians and guards took up their original positions.

After walking through the golden gates, Harry followed Moody into a smaller hallway where there were at least twenty lifts that stood behind fashioned golden grilles. There was a large crowd waiting, everyone too trapped in their own world to notice that Harry Potter was present. Harry started to fidget as he waited, his stomach too twisted in knots to ignore. Questions and doubts ran through his head at an incredibly fast rate. He started fearing the worst, his rational thought leaving him quickly.

A hand rested against Harry's back, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Calm down, Harry," Remus said softly. "It will be fine, you'll see. Practice your calming techniques. Focus on what you can control. Getting yourself worked up will only make it worse. Close your eyes." He waited until Harry did so. "Breathe in slowly." Harry inhaled. "Breathe out just as slowly." Harry exhaled. "Remember the painting you gave us for Christmas. Remember Moony, Padfoot and Prongs playing in the forest."

Mrs. Potter stopped reading as she, Remus, Sirius and Lily stared at James who had closed his eyes and done as instructed to Harry adding motions with his hands when he was inhaling and exhaling.

"Mrs. P, can I ask you something?" Remus asked politely.

"Sure," she said lost.

"By any chance, did you drop James on his head *a lot* when he was a baby?"

"No," she answered shaking her head. "Unfortunately it's genetic. His father was the same way at that age. It took me a lot of work to make him grow up," then she looked sympathetically at Lily and mouthed "I'm sorry."

Harry obeyed Remus' calm and soft voice. He remembered watching Padfoot, Moony and Prongs playing in the forest. He could almost hear Padfoot barking and Moony howling. It almost felt like he was back at Grimmauld Place watching the three animals run around. His nervousness left him and was replaced by a sense of calm that Harry never knew existed. He barely heard something that sounded like jangling and clattering and felt himself being ushered forward. Opening his eyes, Harry saw that the golden grille had slid back to reveal a lift that was quickly filling with people. Fortunately the group managed to squeeze in, Tonks now in front and Moody in back.

"Only Harry would feel calm thinking of Grimmauld Place," Sirius said shuddering and Remus rubbed his back.

The grilles slid shut and the lift started to ascend. The sound of chains rattling could be heard which made Harry a little nervous. How old was this thing? Quite conversation broke out amongst the occupants of the lift as a cool female voice filled the air. "Level Seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Office Gobstones Club and Ludicrous Patents Office."

Lily tried to smother her laughter in a pillow but was gathering attention from the others.

"What's funny?" James asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said biting her lips.

James took the book from his mother and read the passage again. He shrugged and gave the book to Sirius and Remus who read the passage too. Sirius looked lost but Remus had a look of dawning understanding. He gave the book to Mrs. Potter and said:

"My mom laughs every times she reads something about those offices too," he told Lily.

"What?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"It's a Muggle-born thing Mrs. P. They just find it funny," Remus explained shrugging.

"Oh, come on guys," Lily laughed. "An Office for Gobstones Club in the Ministry? An office called *Ludicrous* Patents? You don't find it strange?"

"No!" James said honestly bewildered and Lily just laughed harder.

"Told you," Remus said, "Muggle-born."

The lift doors slid open allowing Harry to see a disheveled-looking corridor that was consumed by various lopsided Quidditch posters on the walls. A few wizards left and the doors closed again. The lift continued upwards again and the woman's voice once announced: "Six, Department of Magical Transportation, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office and Apparation Test Centre."

"Now see," Lily pointed out, "Those make more sense."

The lift doors once again opened and a handful of witches and wizards left. After a moment the doors closed and the journey upwards continued. At the moment Harry was silently wishing that he had asked more questions about today. At least then he could have known what level they would be departing at. "Level Five, Department of International Magical Co-operation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats," announced the female voice.

The doors opened and a few more witches and wizards departed. The crowdedness was finally decreasing allowing everyone to put more space between themselves and the neighbors. The only ones who didn't take advantage of the newfound space were those surrounding Harry. Several witches and wizards glanced at the group curiously but no one saw Harry so nothing was said. The doors closed and the lift restarted its upwards voyage. "Level Four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau."

Only one wizard departed and the trip continued. "Three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, Obliviator Headquarters and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee" was followed by "Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"That's us," Sirius said quietly.

Harry followed Tonks out of the lift and waited as Tonks and Moody switched spots. Moody was supposed to intimidate anyone from allowing their curiosity to get the better of them. They entered a corridor until they reached the Department of Law Enforcement. Walking into the Department, Harry was amazed to see the dark wood walls that were decorated with

portraits of witches and wizards who were looking out proudly. Glancing around Moody, Harry saw a reception desk with a thin, dark brown haired witch sitting behind it.

"Stay here," Moody growled as he approached the desk. "Harry Potter is here for private hearing against Dolores Umbridge."

The receptionist instantly stood and gasped as she caught sight of Harry. "Y—you're early but if you follow me I can take you to the waiting area until everyone arrives," she said quickly then hurried over to the door to her right and opened it. "This way." The four wizards and a witch followed the receptionist through the doorway to another hall, stopping as she reached the second door on the right before opening the door. "One of you may remain out in the reception area—"

"—we already arranged that," Moody growled then looked over his shoulder at Tonks who nodded. "Mr. Potter will be staying with his guardians until his presence is required."

The receptionist glanced at Harry one more time before nodding and hurrying back to her desk. Before Harry could say anything he was ushered into the waiting room by Sirius. Remus entered after them and closed the door, shutting them off from Tonks and Moody. The room was cozy. Sofas with a brown and deep blue pattern were placed in a 'U' formation to allow plenty of room. Paintings were hanging on the wall, no portraits of witches or wizards who would be watching them. A desk was placed in the far corner with parchment, quill and ink. The sight of ink made Harry let out a sigh of relief. He was embarrassed to admit that a small item such as ink could make him feel at ease.

A hand on his shoulder pulled Harry out of his thoughts. "How are you doing, Pronglet?" Sirius asked in a concerned tone.

Harry looked at Sirius and smiled softly. "I'm okay," he said truthfully. "Is this where your case was held?"

Sirius looked a little uncomfortable. "Well...no," he admitted. "My case was down in the actual courtrooms near the Department of Mysteries. Those haven't been used since Voldemort's last reign. They're dungeons, actually. There was no way we were going to allow you to be down there for something like this."

"Oh, Sirius!" Mrs. Potter sobbed and she had moved to hug him again but Sirius was faster this time and he moved quickly from the bed making Mrs. Potter's momentum miss him and get Remus instead. Mrs.

Potter looked at Remus who smiled back at her and then she glared at Sirius who had hid behind Lily's chair.

"Humph," Mrs. Potter muttered going back to her chair. "Teenagers! Can't even show them a little affection."

Desperate to get his mind off of the upcoming events, Harry sat down and grabbed onto the piece of information that he knew nothing about. "So, what's the Department of Mysteries?" he asked curiously. "I've never heard of that before."

"No one knows exactly what they do," James said frowning. "Only Unspeakables work there."

"Must be a very stressful job," Sirius said. "You can't even go home and rant about your stupid boss or partner because you're magically bound not to."

"And how do you know people have to rant about their coworkers?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"Mr. P does it every night!" Sirius moaned. "If I have to hear one more time about how Smith never follows protocol I'm going to have to go shove whatever protocol guide book they have down Smith's throat."

"I never met Smith and I hate him," James wailed. "The guy is a pain!"

"Hey, do you think he is related to that smart ass Zacharias Smith from the D.A.?" Sirius asked.

"Must be," James groaned. "It's genetic!"

"It's a department that covers top secret material," Remus answered as he sat down next to Harry. "No one outside the department really knows what they study...well, that's not really true. No one really wants to know is more like it. The only really known area is prophecies."

Harry blinked a few times as he processed what he had been just told. "Do you mean like the prediction Professor Trelawney made before Pettigrew escaped?" he asked and noticed the glances Sirius and Remus were sharing. He could only imagine witches resembling Professor Trelawney surrounding crystal balls, predicting the deaths of unsuspecting witches and wizards. "People actually believe that sort of thing? I thought Divination was all a bunch of rubbish to scare people into thinking their death was coming."

"Oh, that's our mini-Lily!" Sirius said affectionately.

"Don't you mean mini-James?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"Nope," Remus said firmly. "That is definitely his Evans' genes speaking."

"You tell them Harry!" Lily said firmly.

Sirius let out a laugh. "Don't hold back, kiddo," he said candidly. "Tell us what you really think."

Harry just shrugged his shoulders. "What do you expect me to say?" he asked. "Professor Trelawney predicts my painful death every single class. Do you know how many times I had to keep myself from laughing because Trelawney claimed that 'the Grim' will cross my path?" Sirius and Remus tried to hold back their laughter at the comment. "Okay, so she was right once...one time in two and a half years I've know her that she's been right. That really doesn't enforce confidence in her abilities."

"Well actual prophecies aren't foretold often, Harry," Sirius said truthfully. "Actual predictions tend to come with no warning or planning. Actual Seers are extremely rare. Trust me, the Department of Mysteries know whether a prediction is real or not."

For some reason Harry could tell there was more to the story but didn't press the matter. He figured that now wasn't the time to get in an argument over it. Sitting back against the sofa, Harry started to realize how much he didn't know about the wizarding world. He learned some of the wizarding laws in his third year because of the adoption battle with Remus being a werewolf. He learned about how matters were before Voldemort vanished years ago from Sirius and Remus but other than that Harry never really pressed for information. Sometimes Harry hated being raised by Muggles.

"Harry has a point," Lily said. "I mean. You all know this because you live here but we Muggle-borns don't receive any of this information that you take for granted. There should be a course or something at Hogwarts for Muggle-borns to introduce us to Wizarding laws and life the same way you have Muggle-Studies for wizards."

"I always thought that too," Mrs. Potter agreed. "And I also think Muggle-studies should be mandatory for Wizard raised children. It would keep down the prejudice if they understood from where this Muggle-borns are coming."

"Yes, yes," James said annoyed. "We'll go make a revolution on the school system later okay? Lets read now?"

For the next hour Harry waited while trying to think of anything except the hearing. Sirius had resorted to pacing back and forth with was really starting to bother those sitting on the sofa but they bit their tongue. Both Harry and Remus knew that when Sirius was worried, it was best to just let him be. This was one of the times when the dog was overpowering the man. Sirius was in what could only be described as 'protector mode', his eyes continuously glancing at the door, almost daring someone to enter.

Finally Sirius couldn't take it anymore. "I'm going to see what the hold up is," Sirius said as he walked to the door and opened it. He half turned and looked directly at Remus who nodded at the silent exchange of words before Sirius left, closing the door behind him.

Remus started pushing Sirius away when he had practically glued his face on Remus' and was staring with wide eyes into Remus' eyes.

"I'm trying to silently exchange words here Moony!" Sirius protested and Remus just groaned into a pillow.

Harry glanced at his watch and noticed that it was five minutes to eight. *So Sirius wasn't just being impatient.* "Do you think something's wrong?" Harry asked nervously.

Remus wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled him close. "No, I don't," he said honestly. "Chances are a member of the Wizengamot was delayed. It happens, especially with a private hearing in a private location. You know how Padfoot is.

"So well," James said in a suffering tone raising a hand to his temple dramatically. Lily smacked him.

He wants this matter over with. He wants Umbridge to pay for what she's done to you. Sirius had been incredibly patient for the past few days

"Which is a miracle on its own," Remus said wisely and Sirius scowled at him.

but I think everything is finally hitting him. He's angry, cub, and he doesn't know what to do with that anger. He's angry at Umbridge for doing this to you, the Ministry for basically enforcing it and Dumbledore for not stopping it."

"Too right I am!" Sirius growled. "And they shall feel my wrath!"

"But Professor Dumbledore didn't know!" Harry protested. "No one did."

Remus nodded once. "And that is the first mistake most people make concerning Albus Dumbledore," he said softly. "There are many that believe Dumbledore has the answers to everything; that he is all-knowing but the truth is no one can be. Regardless of the fact that Dumbledore is human, Sirius and I feel like the Headmaster of Hogwarts has failed us. We left you in his care and he failed to keep you safe." Harry moved to protest. "That is what any parent or guardian would feel if their child was harmed, Harry."

"Exactly," Mrs. Potter said approvingly. "Dumbledore doesn't need to be all-knowing but he does need to keep the children in his school safe. I sometimes think he takes too much responsibility on himself and ends up placing his duty as Headmaster in second place."

"Mum! This is Albus Dumbledore you're talking about!"

"So," Sirius shrugged. "I'm with Mrs. P. Maybe Dumbledore should let Minnie take over as Headmistress. What?" he asked at the bewildered looks. "The Headmaster's priority should be Hogwarts' students. I'm not saying he is not a good guy I'm just saying that maybe Dumbledore should let someone that will be focused on the school and just the school take care of it. Dumbledore has the Order, he has the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards. He has to be the General of the war. Maybe he should delegate a little."

"Well said Sirius," Mrs. Potter said approvingly.

The sound of the door opening made both Harry and Remus jump to their feet however it wasn't Sirius who entered. It wasn't Tonks, Moody or even Professor Dumbledore. It was Professor Umbridge. She was wearing a fluffy pink cardigan over her robes similar to the one she wore the first day of classes. She had a strange smile on her face that made Harry feel incredibly uneasy. He didn't like that smile, not one bit.

"Hey! Get out of there hag!" Lily cried.

Remus instantly pushed Harry behind him to protect the teen and pulled out his wand. "I think you have the wrong room, madam," he said tensely. "Please leave."

"Please? Please?" Lily moaned distressed. "Remus! *Please?*"

"There is no reason to be rude even in dire circumstances," Remus said primly.

Sirius and James couldn't help it. They had to laugh.

Professor Umbridge's eyes narrowed at the sight of Remus as she closed the door behind her. "You have no place telling me what to do, *werewolf*," she said coldly as she pulled out her wand. "I suggest you leave the *humans* to talk and find a moon to howl at."

"You, you," Mrs. Potter said disgustedly, "Horrible woman. Don't talk to Remy like that!"

Harry could barely hold back the urge to attack Umbridge. He hated it when people ridiculed Remus because he was a werewolf. In Harry's mind Remus was one of the best people he had ever met.

"Thank you cub!" Remus said blushing.

He hated that some people were so blinded by blood to realize that there was more to a person than what cards fate had handed them. "I choose my own company, Umbridge," Harry said firmly. "Psychotic Ministry fanatics are not among those I associate myself with."

Cheers were heard from all members of the reading group.

"That's my son!" James cried proudly.

A flash of red light shot out of Umbridge's wand and hit Remus squarely in the chest. Remus fell backwards, taking a surprised Harry with him as they both fell to the floor. With a flick of his wrist Harry had his wand in hand and pointing at Umbridge as he rested his free hand on Remus' chest to make sure his guardian was still breathing. He could feel his anger coming to a boil. Umbridge had crossed the line. She had attacked Remus.

Sirius and James had lunged themselves at the book and were held back by Remus and Lily respectively.

"Moony! She attacked you!" Sirius cried. "She deserves to die!"

"Yes, I am very touched about that but attacking Mrs. P is not the answer," Remus said firmly putting Sirius back on the bed. He looked and saw Lily had James under control though both black-haired boys were glaring viciously at the book.

"Put that away, Mr. Potter, before someone is hurt," Umbridge said coolly. "I see that your...*guardians* have poisoned your mind in a matter of a few days. Disrespecting your elders and spouting lies, Mr. Potter. Perhaps that is why they still keep you around. You easily believe everything they say."

"Shut up!" Lily cried furiously. "Haven't you done enough?"

Harry didn't move. He wasn't going to let Umbridge influence anything he did or thought any more. "You're not my teacher anymore, Umbridge," Harry said confidently. "You have no power of what I do or what I believe. I'm warning you, leave now or I'll be forced to defend myself. I believe you remember the events that happened on the train before the term started. I have survived facing Death Eaters and Voldemort. You are nothing compared to them."

"Why you pathetic little liar!" Umbridge cried. "*Crucio!*"

Mrs. Potter dropped the book shocked and no one noticed since they were all opened mouthed gaping at the fallen book.

"She, she-" James stuttered and Lily slowly came out of her daze and caught the book to keep reading.

Harry's reflexes were already reacting. "*Protego Maximus!*" he shouted. A semi-transparent blue tinted shield appeared at the end of Harry's wand. As quickly as possible, Harry focused on pushing his strength through his wand and into the shield. He could feel the curse striking and slowly breaking through the shield. The shield wasn't going to hold off the Unforgivable Curse for long. *Sirius! Please help me!*

"Yes Sirius!" James cried grabbing his friend. "HELP!"

A warm sensation pressed itself against Harry's chest as he pushed more and more of himself into the shield. Sweat started to form on his forehead. His breathing started to quicken. He could feel himself weakening but he forced the shield to remain. Just when Harry felt like he had nothing left to give a wave of power filled his body, filling the room with blinding white light. Umbridge dropped her wand and tried to shield her eyes. Harry instantly banished the shield and rose to his feet.

The door quickly swung open but Harry paid it no mind. His attention was completely on Umbridge and the frozen curse between them. "If you ever come near me or my family again, Umbridge, you will regret it," Harry said forcefully. "You are no better than Voldemort. You have dug your own grave by casting an Unforgivable Curse on me and attacking one of my guardians." With his left hand, Harry motioned for Umbridge's wand and it flew out of her reach. His opponent was unarmed the threat should be over but the desire for revenge

coursed through him. He had never felt anything so powerful before. Harry quickly pushed the feeling aside, touched the middle bead of his suppression necklace and whispered: "Activate."

"Oh Harry, Mummy is so proud of you!" Lily sobbed and James rubbed her back. Mrs. Potter cooed at the scene.

In the blink of an eye Harry felt his strength leave causing him to fall to his knees as the curse shot through the air over his head, breaking a vase. Everything started to spin. Harry closed his eyes to prevent himself from losing his stomach as he felt arms wrap around him and guide him into something firm. He couldn't move on his own; he didn't have the energy to do anything at the moment. A hand tilted his chin upwards causing his head to fall backwards against an arm. Harry let out a soft moan as a cool hand touched his forehead. A bitter liquid was poured in his mouth as a gentle hand started massaging his throat making Harry swallow the liquid reflexively. Slowly Harry could feel the muddiness fading as a fraction of his strength returned. Opening his eyes partially, Harry instantly saw the worried faces of Sirius and Remus looking down at him.

"Remus, Sirius, there is a healer on the way," Professor Dumbledore said as he came into Harry's line of sight. "I would like Harry and you, Remus, to be examined as soon as possible."

Remus shook his head as he grasped Harry's hand. "Dumbledore, I'm fine," he insisted. "I was just stunned." He looked at Harry and shook his head. "I'm so sorry, cub. I should have protected you better. I can't believe she of all people managed to surprise me. I didn't even hear a spell."

"Moony!" Sirius cried. "Stop blaming yourself! Are you going to pull a Harry now?"

"No words," Harry muttered tiredly as he slowly blinked. He could feel oblivion coming, fighting with his will to stay conscious. "She didn't say the spell."

Sirius tightened his hold on his godson as he started to rock back and forth. "Its okay, Harry," he said in wavering voice. "You're going to be okay. We'll get everything straightened out then we'll go back home, where it's safe. I'm never letting you out of my sight again. I'll teach you everything myself if I have to."

"Yes!" Sirius nodded. "Stay where it's safe!"

"Hum, Sirius," Mrs. Potter started slowly. "You can't lock the boy inside forever. Believe me, I'd love to do that to you boys in this troubled times. But you just can't."

"Why not?" Sirius cried. "It's safe!"

"I know," she said smiling kindly. "But a boy needs to have some liberties. He needs his friends. Would you like to be locked away from Jamie and Remy?"

"No," he mumbled mutinously crossing his arms.

That pushed aside any thought of passing out. He had heard Sirius talk like this before, at the beginning of the summer holidays to be more exact. It had taken the entire Order nearly two weeks to convince Sirius that keeping Harry locked away in Black Manor for the rest of his life wasn't a feasible notion. "Sirius, I'm okay," Harry said as he tried to sit up and eventually did with help from Sirius and Remus. He straightened his glasses on his face and looked at his guardians with a grin. "I felt the pendant, did you?"

Sirius nodded as he ruffled Harry's hair. "I sure did," he said. "Are you sure you're all right? You look exhausted."

"Well, of course he is!" Lily cried exasperated. "He just had an outburst."

"Okay Lily," James tried to soothe her. "They know. They have a Healer coming."

Harry nodded as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "I overpowered the shield again," he admitted. "It took a lot out of me. I think that's the only reason the outburst came." Harry glanced around and noticed that they were alone. "Where did everybody go?"

Remus and Sirius helped Harry to the sofa, allowing the teen to sit upright without aid from a person. "Alastor's securing Umbridge, Dumbledore's calling for a Healer and Tonks is right outside to allow us some privacy," Sirius said as he sat down next to Harry. "That was the only curse she cast, right? You weren't hit with anything, were you?"

Harry shook his head. "I wasn't hit with anything, I swear," he said as he leaned against Sirius's shoulder. "So much for things going as planned."

Sirius laughed while Remus let out a chuckle. "Harry, we've come to realize that with you, nothing ever goes as planned," Sirius said candidly. "You have this habit of keeping us on our

toes.” A brief silence filled the air as Remus sat down across from Sirius and Harry. “And I don’t mean that in a bad way,” Sirius added.

“Just like his father,” Mrs. Potter mumbled.

“So I keep you on your toes mum?” James asked grinning.

“Since the day you were born,” Mrs. Potter huffed.

The sound of the door opening made Sirius and Remus grab for their wands and jump to their feet only to relax at the sight of an amused Dumbledore standing in the doorway. “I assure you, I mean no harm,” Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly then stepped aside to allow a tall and lanky, dark haired wizard dressed in attire similar to what Harry had seen at St. Mungo’s a few days ago. “Healer Saunders is here to examine Harry and Remus.”

The Healer entered the room, carrying a small black bag as he pulled out his wand. He waved his wand over Remus first and then motioned for him to sit down. “Slightly agitated and exhausted, Mr. Lupin,” Healer Saunders said professionally as he reached in his bag,

“Of course I’m *agitated!*” Remus cried annoyed. “That woman tried to Crucio my cub!”

“Moony, the Healer is trying to help,” James said cautiously.

“Well, he should stop pointing out the obvious!” Remus huffed.

pulled out a vial and handed it over. “A Calming Draught and a good amount of rest once you return home.” He then hurried over to where Harry was sitting on the sofa and waved his wand over Harry before gasping in shock. “Mr. Potter! How in the world have you managed to magically and physically exhaust yourself to such a state? It’s a miracle you’re still awake!”

“I’m fine,” Harry insisted, knowing that the statement wasn’t going to be believed with what the Healer just revealed. He was tired but at the moment he was running on pure stubbornness not to fall asleep. The sooner this entire mess was over the better for everyone. “Just give me a Pepper-Up Potion so we can start the hearing.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Mr. Potter,” Healer Saunders said as he glanced over at Professor Dumbledore. “I can’t risk increasing the exhaustion and pushing you into a coma. If you were my patient at St. Mungo’s I would confine you to bed rest.” He turned to Sirius. “Is it really necessary for Mr. Potter to be present for this hearing, Mr. Black?”

Sirius let out a frustrated sigh. "Unfortunately," he said. "Harry's statement is needed to validate the charges."

Healer Saunders reached into his bag and pulled out four vials of different colored potions before standing up and handing them over to Sirius. "I suggest you make it quick then," he said seriously. "Calming Draught, Dreamless Sleep, Nutrient Supplement, and Rejuvenation Elixir. The Calming Draught is for the hearing if he should become agitated. The Dreamless Sleep for when you get back home—spread it out for two doses. The Nutrient Supplement should be given before the first dose of Dreamless Sleep. He will need one sip of the Rejuvenation Elixir over the next week to ensure his magical levels return to normal before he returns to school. I recommend plenty of bed rest in a stress-free environment."

"Stress-free is going to be hard to achieve," James mumbled.

Sirius nodded. "Thank you," he said and handed the vials over to Remus who cast an unbreakable charm on the vials before pocketing them.

Healer Saunders nodded before closing his bag and leaving the room. Sirius retook his spot at Harry's side allowing the teen to once again lean against his shoulder. Harry wasn't surprised by the diagnosis. He had been given it plenty of times last year when his outbursts had been completely unpredictable. Thinking about it, Harry figured that this outburst wasn't nearly as bad as the one he had in September but he wasn't about to tell anyone that. The only person who knew how bad that one had been was Professor Dumbledore.

"I believe Wizengamot is ready," Professor Dumbledore said from the doorway. "Are you able to walk, Harry?"

Harry nodded and stood up with help from Sirius and Remus. He was instantly hit with a wave of dizziness and had to close his eyes. Hands gripped him underneath his arms and held him upright. Once the dizziness passed, Harry opened his eyes again and saw Professor Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes. "Let's get this over with," Harry said with as much conviction as he could muster.

"Are you sure Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked with a concerned tone to his voice. "The Wizengamot would understand if you were unable to attend. By now I am certain that everyone that will be present has been told about the attack. Also, before you ask, I have requested that Dolores Umbridge not be present at the hearing for Harry's safety. You will

give your deposition, Harry, and the evidence will be viewed before you are asked to leave. Dolores will then follow the same procedure. You will be called back in for the final decision."

"What is being done about Umbridge attacking Harry and Remus?" asked Sirius.

Professor Dumbledore let out a sigh. "As unfortunate as the event was, it does work in our favor," he said truthfully. "Her wand serves as proof that an Unforgivable was cast. She will face punishment for that. Dolores was instructed to stay away from you, Harry. Her disregard of the Wizengamot's instructions will clearly go against her."

"Excuse me," James asked bewildered. "She cast an Unforgivable on another human being. That is life in Azkaban."

"She didn't succeed," Mrs. Potter said. "Which means she will probably get out with a reduced sentence for that."

With help from Sirius and Remus, Harry followed Professor Dumbledore to a room that had a large rectangular table where four wizards and three witches were already seated, all wearing plum-colored robes with a silver 'W' on the left-side of the chest. Harry quickly recognized Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, sitting in the center and Percy Weasley seated to the far left. They were the only two Harry recognized and the only two who had looks of contempt on their faces. Everyone else was watching Harry with looks of sympathy.

In front of the large table there was a smaller rectangular table with four empty chairs. Sirius and Remus ushered Harry to the second chair from the left before taking their own seats, Remus to Harry's left and Sirius to Harry's right. Professor Dumbledore sat down in the remaining chair next to Sirius. The moment Harry sat down he let out a relieved sigh, feeling significantly more stable sitting down than standing. *Just hold on. You can do this. Sleep can come later.*

"Professor Dumbledore," one of the witches said curiously. "Are you certain Mr. Potter is up for this today? He appears to be on the verge of passing out."

"Delaying the proceedings wouldn't be feasible, Madam Bones," Professor Dumbledore said evenly. "I believe we all want this matter dealt with as quickly as possible."

"Yes, yes, let's get started," Fudge said impatiently. "We are here today to investigate the charges made by Sirius Orion Black and Remus Jonathan Lupin,

James chuckled.

"What could you possibly find funny here James?" Mrs. Potter asked annoyed.

"Moony's and Padfoot's names," and he kept laughing.

"Humph," Remus huffed crossing his arms. "He always laughs. I don't understand what's so funny about Remus Jonathan Lupin."

"It's so pompous," James straightened puffing his chest, "Hello, I'm Remus *Jonathan*," and he fell laughing.

Lily smacked James lightly but she was smiling.

"I understand Remus Jonathan but there is nothing wrong with Sirius Orion Black," Sirius said flatly. At this pronouncement all the other members of the reading group burst out laughing.

guardians of Harry James Potter against one Dolores Jane Umbridge. The charges are abusing the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and High Inquisitor, using an illegal blood quill on a student and verbally abusing a student. Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley—"

"—we know who's here, Cornelius," Madam Bones interrupted. "Let's get started with the deposition."

Fudge cast an annoyed glance at Madam Bones before looking directly at Harry, his eyes void of any sort of compassion towards the teen whatsoever. "Mr. Potter, in your own words, explain the reason for the charges that have been filed against a member of the Hogwarts staff and Ministry of Magic," he said coolly.

Harry inhaled deeply and instantly felt Sirius and Remus grab hold of his hands, serving as a reminder that he wasn't alone. "Professor Umbridge signaled me out from the moment I stepped into her classroom," he began in a soft but firm voice. "She took every chance to ridicule my guardians in front of me and my classmates for who they were and what they have done. When I wouldn't respond to her attacks, she cornered me in the corridor near the Gryffindor Tower before curfew and demanded to know where I had been then assigned me detention when I told her I had been in the library. The following night I was instructed to write 'I must not tell lies' with a special quill that needed no ink, only my blood as the same

words were carved into the back of my hand. The detention started at five in the evening and lasted until midnight. After looking at my hand, Professor Umbridge wasn't satisfied with the results. I was given two more nights of detention."

"What reason did Professor Umbridge give you for these detentions, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones asked curiously.

"Lying," Harry answered truthfully. "She didn't believe I had been in the library." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Professor Dumbledore give him a reassuring nod before returning his full attention to the Wizengamot members in front of him. "After Professor Umbridge had been made High Inquisitor, she started assigning me detentions approximately two times a week. The reasons varied from talking too loud with my friends to not paying attention in class when we had been reading our text books the entire time. However, these detentions were different than the previous ones. In addition to mutilating my own hand, Professor Umbridge took it upon herself to inform me what a trouble-making liar I was. According to her, she was the only one who saw what a burden to the wizarding world I was and it was only a matter of time before my guardians realized it and gave me back to my uncle so he could 'discipline' me like he used to."

Silence filled the room. No one seemed to be expecting Harry to say that. Finally, Madam Bones cleared her throat and looked directly at Professor Dumbledore. "Headmaster, I believe when you announced the charges on behalf of Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin you claimed that you had Mr. Potter's memories of the detentions in a Pensieve?" she asked, her voice nowhere near as firm as before.

"That is correct," Professor Dumbledore said evenly as he reached in his pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a red cube. With a wave of his wand, the cube changed shape and enlarged into the Pensieve Harry had seen a few days ago. "I will, of course, request that I am present for the viewing on Harry's behalf. Experiencing these detentions once was enough for him."

"You mean once was one too many don't you *Dumbledore*?" Lily asked glaring daggers at the book.

"How do we know these are indeed Mr. Potter's memories, Dumbledore?" Fudge asked skeptically.

James fidgeted in his spot and strangled a pillow. He tried biting it but when that wasn't enough he begged, "Can I please, please, smack Fudge around a little?"

"No, James," Mrs. Potter said firmly but she had a little evil smile, "Though I think I might send him a little piece of cake as a treat through Harold tomorrow. After all they do work in the same department," at the horrified look she added innocently, "Now, if some potion that did something not life threatening but lets say; humiliating, just happened to get in my cake by accident, how could I have possibly known?"

The four teens traded very gleeful grins.

"I think Mrs. P, that you should send cake to the whole department and maybe just make sure you let Mr. P know which piece is for Fudge," Lily smiled innocently. "You don't want people thinking something completely untrue about your cake."

"You are so right," Mrs. Potter beamed at the girl.

Harry pulled his hands free and started to rub the back of his right hand nervously as he tried to blink the tiredness he was feeling out of his eyes. "Trust me, they're mine," he said with a slight shudder.

The Wizengamot members eyed Harry's curiously for a moment before Madam Bones stood up. "Mr. Potter, may I see your right hand?" she asked as she walked around the table and approached. Harry nodded and held out his hand which she took a hold of and looked at it closely. "Mr. Weasley, let the record show that Mr. Potter has the words 'I must not tell lies' engraved into the back of his hand."

"As entertaining as this is, I'm afraid we simply can't 'trust you' Mr. Potter," Fudge said stubbornly as Madam Bones retook her seat. "You are the only student from the entire student body at Hogwarts to claim that Professor Umbridge has been anything except an eminent teacher."

"Humiliating and very uncomfortable," Mrs. Potter grunted.

"If she was such an 'eminent teacher' then why did she just attack me with an Unforgivable Curse, Minister?" Harry countered, his patience with Cornelius Fudge wearing thin. "I hate to point fingers, sir, but you were the one to give *Professor* Umbridge the power to overrule every teacher at Hogwarts because she didn't agree with two students losing their position on the Quidditch team for physically attacked me."

"You tell them Prongslet!" Sirius cried.

"That is enough, Mr. Potter," Fudge scolded angrily. "You have no right to judge the decisions I make for the good of the wizarding community."

***Is it the wizarding community or your future as Minister that you're trying to protect?* Harry mused. "You're right," he answered with a shrug. "I have no right to question your decisions. I have no right to question the decisions made by anyone older than me, isn't that right, Minister?" Silence. "Professor Dumbledore stood up for me after the third task and received a public backlash from you because you refused to believe what happened to me. I have learned from you and Professor Umbridge that if you don't share the beliefs of those in authoritative positions you either stay silent or face their wrath. Now perhaps you understand why I remained silent about this until my guardians discovered the scars on my hand. Fortunately, I have two guardians who don't care what you think and are determined to do what's right regardless of the consequences."**

"Yay for Padfoot and Moony!" James cried clapping and Mrs. Potter and Lily cheered loudly. Remus blushed violently but Sirius basked on the praise.

Madam Bones cleared her throat. "Well, Mr. Potter, you have certainly left us with much to discuss," she said diplomatically. "I believe that is all we need for now. You may leave with Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin while we view the detentions from the Pensieve."

Sirius and Remus helped Harry to his feet, pausing for a moment when he started to sway as a wave of dizziness hit. Closing his eyes, Harry felt Sirius and Remus grab hold to stabilize him. He could finally feel the exhaustion setting in. He had no idea how he managed to hold it off for as long as he had but he was certainly paying for it now. Harry seriously doubted that he would be able to stay awake while the Wizengamot looked at his memories and heard Umbridge's statement.

"Auror Tonks, I would appreciate it if you would accompany them to the waiting area," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "A little extra security couldn't hurt."

"Especially if they let Psychotic Ministry Employees loose," Remus grumbled.

Harry looked up and noticed that Tonks and Moody had been waiting by the door. That surprised him. He didn't even hear them come in which was either saying a lot for Tonks or it was pointing out just how out of it Harry was. With as much strength as Harry could muster, he walked out with Sirius and Remus holding him under his arms. Slowly, they returned to the waiting room with Tonks leading the way. She was trying her best to maintain the role as a

protector but anyone could clearly see that Tonks was more worried about Harry than her duty as an Auror at the moment.

"Nymphadora is such a dear," Mrs. Potter cooed.

"I am glad she likes Harry so much," Lily praised.

"But I wouldn't call her Nymphadora to her face," Remus whispered to the other two boys who nodded.

Upon entering, Harry couldn't help but notice that someone had been busy while they had been gone. Waiting for them was a variety of snacks and flasks filled with Butterbeer, pumpkin juice and spiced cider. The strong aromas of sweet and spicy filled the room but it wasn't too overwhelming. Sitting down on the soft sofa, Harry finally allowed his mind to drift as he could feel darkness taking him. He had done everything he could. All he could do now was hope that the Wizengamot believed him.

"What do you think is taking so long? It's been three hours."

"It took us four hours just to view the detentions, remember? Just be grateful that Harry's resting."

It took a moment for Harry to figure out that his head was lying on something firm while the rest of his body was on something soft. A blanket was covering him, making Harry feel a little warm. His glasses and shoes had been removed along with his wand holster. Pulling his blanket tighter, Harry buried his face into his firm pillow, ready to fall back into oblivion. He felt exhausted and extremely sore. At the moment, no movement seemed to be an extremely good idea.

A hand started to run through his hair in a calming motion. "Do you think he's angry with me, Padfoot, for failing to protect him?" the voice of Remus asked softly. "I never thought Umbridge would actually strike out at us...I never thought she would use an Unforgivable."

James swatted Remus head.

"Ouch, what was that for?"

"For being dumb."

"You and me both," Sirius said with a sigh. "As far as Harry is concerned, no I don't think he's blames you for what happened. He knows you did everything you could to protect him."

"Of course he does," Sirius said firmly. "Listen to what I say!"

"Only in this occasion Remus," Lily said cautiously. "Please feel free to not pay attention to anything else Sirius might say like that whole having a swamp on the fifth floor issue."

"Ah, my swamp," Sirius sighed dreamily.

"I had to remind him," Lily moaned.

"But it wasn't enough," Remus muttered. "I really don't know how to deal with this. Harry's being attacked from his classmates, his teachers, the Ministry, Death Eaters, and Voldemort. What happens next time when we're cornered by Death Eaters or Voldemort? We can't rely on an outburst to protect him in the future."

"What are you saying, Moony?" asked Sirius.

"I think I should talk to Dumbledore about adding security to Hogwarts," Remus said softly.

"I know the members of the Order all have their own duties but I don't think it would hurt to have at least one person at Hogwarts to help with keeping matters under control."

"Good idea!" James beamed.

"You know, just a little push and I think we can make Moony see the light with me and the whole safe-house idea," Sirius said satisfied.

"No, please, don't," Mrs. Potter moaned.

The sound of the door opening halted the conversation. From the sound of the voices Harry had figured out that he was lying on Remus' leg and Sirius was sitting nearby. He heard Sirius rise to his feet and move. Shifting slightly, Harry groaned as the simple movement reminding him stiff muscles. A hand gently rubbed his back, pulling Harry the remainder of the way to consciousness. Slowly, Harry opened his eyes as he rolled onto his back and looked up to see a somewhat blurry Remus looking down at him.

"Don't worry, cub," Remus said with a grin. "It's just Tonks. She's been keeping us informed for the past few hours. Tonks spoke to Alastor and apparently Umbridge's deposition didn't go

too well even with Fudge trying to help her out. We don't know the details but we're optimistic that everything will go our way." Remus repositioned his body as he slid Harry's glasses on the teen's face. "So, how are you feeling?"

Harry blinked a few times as everything came into focus. His mind wasn't completely awake yet so it took him a few moments to process everything Remus said. "I'm okay," he said tiredly. Covering his mouth to hide a yawn, Harry rolled onto his side, biting back a wince as his muscles protested at the movement. "How much longer 'til we can go home?"

Remus let out a laugh and once again ran his fingers through Harry's hair. "I don't know, cub," he said in an amused tone. "It shouldn't be too much longer but it all depends on how stubborn Fudge is going to be. After everything that has happened today it's going to be extremely difficult for the Wizengamot to allow the Minister all of the freedoms he's had for so long. I can't tell you how proud we are of the way you handled yourself today, Harry. I know you're parents would be proud of you too. In a matter of minutes you managed to bring to light everything the Order has been trying to do for months. I don't think I've ever seen Fudge's face so red before."

"We are bursting with pride Harry," Lily beamed.

"Very proud!" James cried.

"Me too," Mrs. Potter said. "Even though no one ever says that your grandparents would be proud," she huffed.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as much as he could. "I just wanted them to believe me," he said softly. Harry could already feel himself drifting back off to sleep again. "I didn't mean to sound rude—"

"—don't worry about it," Remus said reassuringly. "You said what was needed. Fudge was completely out of line. If you hadn't said something I know Sirius and I would have, Dumbledore would have. Fudge was just trying to save himself from scrutiny, which he failed miserably at. He didn't earn any sympathizers today with the way he was acting."

Sirius knelt down and gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "We have a slight problem," he said in annoyance. "A decision has been made but the hag is going to be there. She doesn't have her wand but I don't like this one bit. Tonks assures me that the hag will be restrained, like that will do any good."

Remus just shook his head and rubbed his tired eyes. "I don't like it either but there's little we can do about it," he said calmly. "The accused and accuser need to be present for the decision. It's standard policy. Just remember that there'll be a lot more protection this time. There'll be five members of the Order present who will hex Umbridge into oblivion if she even tries to do something."

"Yes," Sirius said gleefully rubbing his hands. "Just give me one tiny excuse. Please!"

Harry had to admit that Remus had a point. It would be suicide for Umbridge to try anything with so many people in the room, not that it mattered anymore. "Let's just get this over with," he said as he rolled onto his back once again and tried to sit up but failed miserably. He tried again and felt hands help him into the sitting position, breathing in sharply at the quick movement. After a few calming breaths, Harry let Sirius pull him to his feet and struggled to stay upright but managed.

Sirius and Remus clearly noticed Harry's difficulties by once again supporting the teen under the arms. Once again Harry made his way to where the hearing was being held with Remus and Sirius helping him the entire way. Entering the room, Harry noticed that another rectangular table had been added, facing the larger table where the Wizengamot sat. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the table to the left alerting the three wizards of where they should sit.

After Harry was helped to his seat, Sirius and Remus took their seats at Harry's side, both with their hands ready to grab their wands if they had to. Once Dumbledore took his seat, a door off to the right opened to reveal a disgruntled Dolores Umbridge being escorted into the room by Kingsley Shacklebolt and a tall dark-haired Auror that Harry didn't recognize. Umbridge's wrists were being held by restraints and her mouth seemed to be bound by some sort of spell to prevent any words from spilling out. Just looking at her caused Harry to wonder what had happened during her deposition.

Umbridge was forced into her seat by Shacklebolt before he took his position behind her with his wand already in his hand. With as well as Harry knew the Auror he figured it was taking a lot of self restraint on Shacklebolt's part to remain silent. Kingsley was an amazing Auror but he had a sense of righteousness that couldn't be denied. The man hated how Fudge was manipulating everyone to follow his beliefs. That was what pushed the Auror to join the Order; at least that was what Shacklebolt told Harry.

Madam Bones cleared her throat and enfolded her fingers on the table in front of her. "A matter such as this serves as a reminder that we as a society are not as different from the Muggle world as we would like to believe," she began. "I must say that I am astounded at what I have heard and seen today. I never thought the day would come when I would consider pulling my niece out of Hogwarts but it has arrived. Dolores Umbridge, your actions against Mr. Potter are inexcusable. You completely took advantage of your position at Hogwarts and at the Ministry to torture and hinder a child in the very place he is supposed to feel secure and allowed to grow. You are henceforth banned from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A restraining spell will be cast, preventing you from coming within one hundred meters of Mr. Harry James Potter. The remainder of your sentencing will be determined pending a complete examination at St. Mungo's."

"Excuse me? What?" James asked bewildered. "Are we forgetting the Unforgivable here? Life in Azkaban is what she should get!"

"She must have used an insanity defense," Mrs. Potter said annoyed.

Harry couldn't help but let out a large sigh of relief. He would never have to see Umbridge again and with any luck neither would anyone at Hogwarts. He barely felt Remus grasping his shoulder while Sirius grabbed hold of his hand. It was so hard to grasp the fact that it was finally over. No more detentions, no more reading out of that stupid book and no more of Umbridge's toad-like looks.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones continued causing Harry to look up at her in surprise. "The Wizengamot would like to commend you for the courage you have shown today. We understand that it is hard to come forward, especially when those who are supposed to be looking out for you are in conflict with each other. We also understand that for someone with your history it is difficult to trust strangers when those who are put in trustful positions abuse them. We can't begin to apologize for what you've had to endure, Mr. Potter, with Madam Umbridge and with your Uncle. No one has the right to cause physical harm upon you or force you to harm yourself, please remember that. If anyone should ever perform such an act against you, please tell someone."

Madam Bones shifted her gaze to Professor Dumbledore. "Headmaster Dumbledore, I am appalled that this sort of mistreatment could continue for such a long time," she added. "Your entire staff and student body were aware of these detentions but did nothing to stop them, therefore aiding Madam Umbridge in her quest. You may have not known the details but you

were aware of the conflict between Madam Umbridge and Mr. Potter. I don't know how Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin are able to sit with you at the moment but I can only conclude that they are stronger individuals than I am. To prevent anything like this happening in the future, the Heads of Houses are required to inform their students about the forms of abuse and encourage them to report it when it is noticed."

Loud claps and cheers were heard.

Sirius chuckled, "He, he, Dumbledore got scolded."

"He deserved it," Remus said. "He should have looked into the amount of detentions Harry was getting."

Professor Dumbledore could only nod in acceptance.

"Furthermore, the Ministry of Magic Educational Decree Number Twenty-four will be voided," Madam Bones said as she glanced over at Fudge who was surprisingly quiet. "We will however be sending a representative that is approved by the *entire* Wizengamot who will periodically observe classes to ensure that all teachers are treating the students properly. In addition, it is recommended that you, Headmaster Dumbledore, find someone who will serve as an impartial party for students to talk to when needed. Also, you will need to find a replacement Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher before the end of the holiday or the Ministry will have to find one for you."

"That is quite reasonable," Lily said. "Muggle schools have counselors so the children can talk if they have any problems."

"That won't be necessary, Madam Bones," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "An individual has already approached me for the position. I feel that he would be a great asset to ensure the students are prepared for their end of the year exams."

"And who would this individual be?" Fudge asked nervously.

"Sirius Black," Professor Dumbledore said with a smile causing everyone of the Wizengamot to stare at Sirius in shock.

They weren't the only ones. Remus smirked, "Told you to never say never!"

Sirius said nothing, he just stared blankly ahead.

"I think he's in shock," Lily said.

James waved a hand in front of Sirius' face and getting no response asked:

"May I slap him?"

"No," Remus and Mrs. Potter scolded together.

Remus shook Sirius, "Paddy, it's not that bad. You're just a te-"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Sirius cried and fainted.

"He fainted!" Remus cried surprised tapping Sirius' face lightly.

"Sirius dear, wake up," Mrs. Potter called kneeling next to Sirius and brushing his hair.

"That's way too girly," James mocked.

"I am not girly. I manly passed out in shock," Sirius said without opening his eyes.

"It's just a mock faint," Lily snorted.

"I am in shock!"

"Mock fainted people don't talk Paddy" Remus said and then turned to the rest of the group, "I agree with James, that is quite girly."

Harry was in the same state. Sirius had always teased Remus about being a Professor, claiming that the thought of a Marauder actually teaching children (Harry didn't count of course) was laughable.

"And Professor Dumbledore said that Sirius approached him," Lily snickered. "How things change."

"I bet I only did it so I can be near Harry to protect him," Sirius muttered.

"Probably true," Remus conceded.

"I—I must protest!" Fudge objected. "Sirius Black teaching children? He—he—"

"—has been instructing Harry in the ways of Defense for years," Professor Dumbledore said casually. "I believe you all remember the incident on the Hogwarts Express before the fall

term began. Regardless of your opinions considering Voldemort's return, the students need to learn how to defend themselves properly. Sirius Black was an Auror before his unjust placement in Azkaban. He is certainly qualified for the position and is willing to actually teach the students instead of having them simply read out of a book."

"At the moment I can't think of anyone better for the position," Madam Bones agreed then looked at Sirius. "Congratulations, Mr. Black. You certainly have your work cut out for you. Now, unless there is anything else I believe this hearing is adjourned. Mr. Potter, Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin, you are free to go. We may call upon you in the future to discuss the confrontation that occurred before the hearing. We are aware Madam Umbridge cast an Unforgivable curse with intent to strike Mr. Potter. We will be waiting for the results of her examination before issuing her sentence but her deeds will not go unpunished."

"Good," James muttered. "I was starting to wonder."

With their dismissal, Harry was pulled to his feet by his guardians and was helped out of the room. He didn't even both glancing at Umbridge or even register the words of congratulations that Tonks and Moody gave him. He was completely overwhelmed with everything. He had won the case, no more Umbridge and Sirius was now his Defense teacher. For the first time in a long time, things were certainly looking up. Things were going to get interesting when everyone returned to Hogwarts.

"Professor Padfoot," Remus smirked.

"Shut up Moony!" Sirius growled.

"Professor Padfoot, Professor Padfoot!" James raised his hand.

"You too James!"

--

A/N- Thank you all for reading and Reviewing!

Not mine.

Chapter 19

Revelations and Precautions

The trip home had been a quiet but quick one. Professor Dumbledore had given Sirius a portkey which transported Sirius, Remus, Harry and Tonks to this kitchen of Black Manor. Sirius and Remus wasted no time putting Harry to bed after giving him the potions the Healer had prescribed. Harry slept an entire day and night without waking and without nightmares but the Marauders weren't surprised. They had discovered that Harry slept fairly well as long as someone was in the room with him. It was almost like Harry could sense that he wasn't alone and felt safe which was enough to keep the nightmares at bay.

Remus cleared his throat and was about to open his mouth when James silenced him with a glare.

"Don't start Moony!" James hissed.

"I was just saying, that if Harry was an emp-"

"HE ISN'T!"

"James Potter do not shout!" Mrs. Potter scolded. "Now, Remus, please explain what you were thinking."

"You see Mrs. Potter, sometimes Harry kind of has this feelings and it's like he knows what other people are feeling."

"You mean, he is an empath?" Mrs. Potter asked in a shocked whisper.

"NO HE'S NOT!" James yelled again.

"James, if he is one, that is nothing to be ashamed of!" Mrs. Potter said disappointed at her son's behavior.

"He's not ashamed," Lily explained. "He's in denial because he says the Ministry would lock Harry and try to use him as their spy."

"Oh James," Mrs. Potter said softening "That is a legend!"

"Yeah, well. Better safe than sorry!" James mumbled crossing his arms.

When Harry finally awoke he had to smile at the sight of Midnight sleeping next to him. The dog was making 'putt-ing' noises followed by soft whimpers while his legs moved. Harry had to hold back a laugh at the thought of Sirius having dreams of chasing something like any normal dog would. After sliding his glasses on, Harry didn't have the heart to wake Midnight

and carefully crawled out of bed, realizing that his soreness and exhaustion was thankfully gone.

"Do you have doggy dreams Padfoot?" Remus asked chuckling.

"Don't know," Sirius huffed. "Do you have wolfie dreams?" he shot back and Remus stuck his tongue out at him.

"Children," James teased. "Don't fight."

As quietly as possible, Harry crept out of his room and took the usual path down the hallway to the staircase to see that Remus was sitting in front of the fire watching the painting of Prongs, Moony and Midnight playing. From the amount of sunlight that was shining in Harry figured it had to be late afternoon at the earliest. Walking down the stairs, Harry could hear the sounds of a dog barking playfully and had to wonder how long Remus had been simply watching the painting, remembering the past. When left alone Harry knew his guardians had a tendency to dwell on what might have been, especially when they remembered the Potters. The loss of their friends was a pain that never seemed to actually go away.

James and Lily hugged Remus and Sirius.

"Mischief managed," Harry said softly as he approached the sofa Remus was sitting on from behind. At the sound of the password, the three animals stopped playing and ran back into the forest. The trees stopped moving and it once again was the unmoving painting that Sirius and Remus had opened on Christmas morning.

Remus quickly looked over his shoulder and smiled. "Good afternoon, cub," he said and motioned for Harry to sit down next to him. "I take it Padfoot is still sleeping."

"Of course," Mrs. Potter mumbled.

"Et tu Mrs. P!" Sirius cried raising his arms and flopping back on the bed.

Harry nodded as he took the offered seat and immediately felt an arm wrap an arm around his shoulders. "He seemed to be enjoying his dream too much to wake him," he said with a grin which Remus returned. Looking at his guardian, Harry couldn't help but notice the shadows under his eyes. Evidently not everyone in the house had been catching up on their much needed rest. "No offense, Moony, but you look exhausted. Have you slept at all?"

Remus chuckled and pulled Harry closer. "No offense taken," he said in an amused tone. "I have slept, Harry, just not much. I had quite a few matters to take care of." He pulled out the latest issue of the 'Daily Prophet' from his robes. "I was going to hide this but it would probably be better if you knew what to expect when you returned to Hogwarts." Remus handed over the paper. "Somehow Rita Skeeter found out about the hearing. The good news is she isn't blaming you."

Harry could only groan in annoyance. This was the last thing he needed. Now everyone was going to know what he had managed to hide for months. "She never does," he muttered bitterly as he unrolled the newspaper to see the headline on the front page. "She's too scared of Sirius to say anything against me anymore but she always manages."

"Yes, be scared," Sirius said menacingly. "Very scared!"

MINISTRY'S DESIRE TO CONTROL BACKFIRES

The appointment of Dolores Umbridge as Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching position at Hogwarts was

"A disaster!" James huffed.

"The worst idea ever," Sirius mumbled.

"Could we keep reading?" Lily hissed.

greeted with mixed reviews in September, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, ensured the public that his appointed member would be up to the challenge to instruct the children of Hogwarts in a way the Ministry declared appropriate instead of the colorful tutelage Professor Dumbledore had provided in the past.

"Which means, not at all," Mrs. Potter mumbled but closed her mouth at Lily's glare.

No one questioned his decision until now.

This reporter has learned that on the final day of the fall term Professor Dolores Umbridge was suspended and accused of abusing her position and abusing a student. The hearing was privately held yesterday where the truth of Professor Umbridge's tactics was brought to light

along with the Minister's actual motives. Professor Umbridge was placed at Hogwarts to instill the Minister's beliefs into the minds of the student body by any means necessary.

Those means included the use of a blood quill and verbal abuse repeatedly to break the student away from their individualistic thinking. This student was chosen by Professor Umbridge because of his leadership standing amongst the student body. "Once he accepted the 'truth', his supporters would follow," Umbridge revealed at the hearing. "I did what I had to for the benefit of the Minister and the Ministry. It was my duty to stop the lies that Headmaster Dumbledore was passing on to the children."

"I hate to think this but she might actually get a straight jacket at St. Mungo's instead of Azkaban," Mrs. Potter said with a grimace.

Those lies being the claims that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned. Minister Fudge still insists that there is no actual proof of You-Know-Who's return and is declaring ignorance of Professor Umbridge's tactics. "She never told me what her actions were, only that she was making progress in creating a more pleasant learning environment for the students," the Minister revealed to the members of the Wizegamot who were present.

Dolores Umbridge has been removed from her positions at Hogwarts permanently as is currently at St. Mungo's for a full examination to determine her mental state. Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, served as the Head of the Wizegamot for the hearing made no effort to hide her disgust at the actions Dolores Umbridge had taken. "I never thought the day would come when I would consider pulling my niece out of Hogwarts but it has arrived," Bones commented.

As a result, measures are being taken to ensure this unforgivable behavior never happens to a student at Hogwarts again. The Ministry of Magic Educational Decree Number Twenty-four which allows the position of High Inquisitor has been annulled and in replacement the teachers at Hogwarts will be periodically monitored by a representative that the Wizegamot as a whole agree upon. Also, students will be informed on how to recognize the signs of abuse. There will also be a councilor available to the students at all times.

Candidates for the councilor position have yet to be revealed. However, Headmaster Dumbledore did announce that Professor Umbridge's replacement had been chosen and would be none other than Sirius Black, escapee from Azkaban wrongfully accused of murder and godfather to Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived. "[Black is certainly qualified for the

position and is willing to actually teach the students instead of having them simply read out of a book," Dumbledore announced to the Wizengamot.

Remus turned to smile wickedly at Sirius who was fanning himself and gulping convulsively.

This reporter can only hope that Sirius Black can provide what the students at Hogwarts so desperately need and wish him good luck at his new post. This reporter also wishes to commend Mr. Harry Potter on the courage to bring forth the charges of the wrongs performed against him and wish him a speedy recovery.

Harry let out a sigh as he tossed the 'Daily Prophet' aside. Closing his eyes, Harry leaned against Remus as the reality of the article hit him. Everyone at school was going to know that every single detention had actually been a night of torture. "How did she find out about this?" Harry asked in frustration. "I thought the reason the hearing was private was so no one found out about it."

"It was," Remus said gently. "I'm sorry, cub. I know you didn't want this but there's nothing we can do about it now. Bill stopped by this morning to check on you. Arthur is home now but he's still recovering. Molly had to explain everything to Ron, Ginny and the twins so they didn't storm in here demanding to see you. I think everyone's feeling a little guilty for standing by and letting it happen. You know how Molly is. She probably gave each of them a stern lecture about abuse and told them not to bring the matter up unless you did."

"Yeah," Lily snorted. "Like that's going to work!"

"That'll work with the Weasleys but not Hermione," Harry grumbled. "I really don't want to get in another fight with her because I don't talk about my problems with her and Ron anymore. I talk with you and Sirius. Isn't that enough?"

"Sure is," Mrs. Potter nodded and glared at Remus who made a small shrugging motion.

"Before Harry's third year Ron and Hermione were used to being the only ones there for Harry. He told them everything. I don't think they like being out of the loop like that. I know they should think it's normal since I bet they don't go off telling Harry their problems. But I think they might be a little territorial there and did not like losing territory to me and Padfoot. Especially Hermione. She kind of likes to be the voice of reason and now that's me!"

"Have you guys noticed how Moony is getting less and less modest by each book we read?" Sirius asked no one in particular but James nodded sagely anyway.

"Yeah," Remus huffed crossing his arms. "Look who's talking. The only reason you're not named Narcissus is because your Aunt beat your mother at it."

Remus didn't answer immediately. He stared at the unmoving painting above the fireplace deep in thought. "You and I are more alike then I ever thought, cub," he said at last in a quiet voice. "I know things will be different with Sirius at Hogwarts

"Yes," Lily said shaking her head. "I pity McGonagall."

now but you have to admit that for the past few years, secrets have been a major part of your life. I know you're scared about your friends finding out about your outbursts. I know you still think you'll scare them away—"

"—because I will," Harry insisted. "You don't know what it was like when that outburst came at the Ministry. The power, the need for revenge...it scared me. I wanted Umbridge to feel all of the pain she made me feel." Harry looked away in shame as the memory hit him at full force. "I wanted to hurt her so badly for what she did to me...what she did to you. There wasn't much she could say about Sirius but you...I hate it when people think of you as less than everyone else because you're a werewolf. I hate the stereotypes. If I hadn't activated the necklace—"

"Oh Harry," Remus launched himself at Lily and hugged the book. "You are so nice."

Lily swatted Remus away and grabbed the book back. In an undertone she asked James, "Is the full moon close? Does he always become like this?"

"No," James shook his head. "The full moon was last week. That's chocolate withdrawal. He hasn't had any since yesterday," and he went to Remus' rucksack and took a chocolate frog, handed it to Remus and patted his head. Remus glared at him but very happily ate the chocolate.

"—but you did, Harry," Remus said gently. "You did activate the necklace and that's what matters. We all have moments we're not proud of. With what you had to go through I don't think anyone would blame you for being angry at Umbridge. It's easy to give into that anger but causing pain on others isn't right. You were right to activate the necklace and not act on your anger. I'm proud of you, cub, prouder than I ever thought I could be."

Harry looked up at Remus as he bit his lower lip. "Really?" he asked hopefully.

Remus laughed and ruffled Harry's hair. "Really," he confirmed as he tightened his hold on Harry. "Just to prepare you, Severus and possibly Dumbledore will be stopping by soon."

"Excuse me what?" Sirius shrieked.

"Severus and Dumbledore are going there," Mrs. Potter explained.

"WHAT?" Sirius shrieked again.

"I don't think Padfoot's heart is going to come out of reading this books unaffected," James said wisely and Lily and Mrs. Potter chuckled while Remus rubbed Sirius' back.

Harry looked at Remus with a raised eyebrow. That had certainly been the last thing he expected to hear. Professor Snape avoided Black Manor whenever possible. He was extremely vocal of how he hated that Headquarters was at Sirius' house. "Why?" Harry asked cautiously.

Remus looked at Harry innocently. "Does there have to be a reason?" he asked.

"Oh Moony," James said in a sing song voice. "What are you hiding?"

"James," Mrs. Potter scolded. "He isn't hiding anything."

"I have to agree with James on this one Mrs. P," Lily said. "What are you hiding Moony?"

Harry's suspicions heightened. Remus was definitely hiding something. "Not at all," Harry said evenly. "There is absolutely nothing odd about Professor Snape, the sworn enemy of the Marauders, stopping by for a spot of tea at Black Manor during the holidays. It happens all the time."

"I sure hope not!" Sirius shrieked.

"Well when you put it that way," Remus said with a laugh as he ruffled Harry's hair again. "There is something we have to talk about but I would rather wait for Sirius to be coherent for it. We've had quite a few talks with Dumbledore about your visions and after this last one—well—we don't want you to go through with that anymore. It's not worth the risk to your health and mental state."

Harry had to agree. He didn't want to experience the visions anymore either. The fact that he had been sick in bed for days afterward was just another reason on the long list that Harry

already had. He could handle the pain...to a point. However, the feelings and the images that came with the visions were what made his skin crawl. "Okay," Harry said carefully. "I can agree with that but why would that require both of my guardians and one of my teachers to talk to me?"

As if on cue the fireplace came to life with green flames. Harry instinctively jumped back as Professor Snape stepped out of the fireplace and shook the soot off of his robes. Snape took in the scene of Harry and Remus sitting on the couch obviously in the middle of a discussion with a sneer.

"Unpleasant as always," James snorted.

Remus released Harry, stood up and greeted Professor Snape with a nod. "Harry, I think it's time to wake Padfoot up," he said casually.

Harry didn't need to be told twice and hurried off for his room. He ran up the stairs, down the hallway and peaked in his room to see that Midnight was still sleeping on the bed. Knowing that he was going to pay for it, Harry walked to his bed and started shaking the big black dog. Midnight groaned in protest and rolled over so that he was now out of reach. *Well, there's always plan 'B'.* Jumping up, Harry pulled his legs in and fell on the bed causing Midnight to jump in the air with a yelp. Midnight instantly turned to Harry and growled playfully.

"No fun Harry! Cold water is so much better!" James said.

"James, don't be mean," Mrs. Potter scolded.

"But Mrs. P, a few days ago you woke Sirius with cold water," Remus pointed out.

"It was noon and he wouldn't wake no matter what I did!" Mrs. Potter tried to defend herself while James and Lily laughed.

"Sorry, Midnight," Harry said with a smile. "Professor Snape's here. Remus said I had to wake you up."

With a *pop* Sirius was now where Midnight had been. The Animagus raked a hand through his disheveled hair before nodding. "All right, let's get this over with," he said regretfully as he got off the bed. "The sooner Snape is out of here the better for all of us."

"I'm so with you," Sirius said in a pained voice.

"Good to know he won't change that much," Lily chuckled.

Harry slid off the bed and joined Sirius in walking out of the room. "Sirius, he is your co-worker now so don't you think it would be...I don't know...smart to put the past behind you?" he asked cautiously. "You are on the same side now, right?"

"Don't you dare start acting like Moony now," Sirius warned as they walked to the staircase. "Besides, a truce has to go both ways and Snape's not about to let his animosity with the Marauders—or their children—go. I'll be as civil as I can for your sake but I'm not about to start chatting about old times."

That would have to do. Harry and Sirius walked down the stairs in silence. It was going to be a miracle of Sirius and Professor Snape could last the rest of the school year without hexing each other senseless. Harry didn't know what Professor Dumbledore was thinking. Keeping Sirius and Snape in such a close proximity to each other was only asking for disaster. In fact, Harry figured it would probably take a month at most before Sirius started pranking Snape with Fred and George.

"Honestly Harry," James said. "You're being overly dramatic. I mean. They've been in the same close proximity for five years now and they're fine."

"Do you call hexing each other at every opportunity fine James?" Lily asked.

"Snivellus gives as good as he gets," James said defensively.

"I'm not saying he doesn't. I'm just saying they are not *fine*!"

Remus and Snape were still standing in front of the fireplace however they were standing at opposite ends. Professor Snape was waiting impatiently looking like he wanted nothing more than to get this over with while Remus just looked nervous. Sirius and Remus shared a look like they always did when a 'family discussion' took place. Those looks usually happened when neither man wanted to start the discussion but knew someone had to.

"Harry, perhaps you should sit down," Remus said gently and waited for Harry to sit down on the sofa. "Remember what I was telling you about your visions?" Harry nodded. "Well, Dumbledore feels that having you learn a magical and mental defense known as Occlumency will stop this visions. Occlumency shields the mind from external penetration. It's rather

difficult but at the moment it's the only choice we have. This link you have with Voldemort had just become too dangerous for you."

"Er—okay," Harry said slowly. "Hypothetically, what would happen if I didn't learn this correctly?"

"We have no doubt that the Dark Lord *is* aware of your connection, Potter, with that little stunt you performed before the holidays," Professor Snape said coolly. "The Dark Lord will not hesitate to use it to his advantage by planting dreams and thoughts in your mind. It is essential that you learn this."

"And you couldn't explain that nicely why?" Mrs. Potter snapped.

"Because he is Snivellus!" Sirius moaned.

Harry paled at the mention of dreams. He had experienced his fair share of odd dreams this year. What if Voldemort already knew of the connection? What if Voldemort had been in his head ever since the end of September? "Dreams?" Harry asked weakly as his breathing quickened. Without another word Harry ran to his room as fast as he could. He needed to know. He needed to be sure that Voldemort wasn't in his head. Opening his school trunk, Harry pulled out his dream journal and hurried back to where the three adults were still standing. He could barely contain his nerves as he handed his dream journal over to Remus before sitting back down.

"Harry, what's this?" Remus asked cautiously as he opened the journal and started to glance at what was written on the pages.

"It's my dream journal for Divination," Harry said as he stared at the floor. "I—I've been having some weird dreams this year so I thought...I thought that maybe..."

"Voldemort was already putting dreams in you're head," Sirius finished as he sat down and wrapped an arm around Harry. "Good thinking, Pronglet."

Remus flipped through the journal as he quickly read the dreams Harry had documented. He was almost a third of the way through before he let out a sigh and handed the journal over to Professor Snape who read the page before closing the journal. "Harry," Remus said as he tried to remain calm. "Those dreams about the corridor, were they similar to the vision you had when Arthur was attacked?"

Harry thought for a minute. He had never thought about it but he had to admit that the corridor was remarkably similar to the corridor in his dreams. Closing his eyes, Harry buried his face in his hands which was all the confirmation the wizards in the room needed. Sirius pulled Harry closer while Remus quietly cursed. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. *Why does everything have to happen to me?*

"It's all right, Harry," Sirius said in a reassuring voice. "We'll work through this. I promise."

"Yes! I'll make everything right again!" Sirius puffed his chest.

"I really don't know if I should laugh at him or thank him," Lily told Mrs. Potter seriously.

"I think, thanking is in order but you do have a point, he is getting a little conceited," Mrs. Potter said.

"A little? Getting? Again he was born that way!" Remus said firmly, "I think we should start calling him Cissus!" he finished seriously.

"Moony, Moony, Moony," Sirius shook his head. "I'm not conceited! It's just that I happen to know my value."

Harry pulled away and looked at Sirius, unable to hide the fear from his face. It wasn't going to be 'all right'. Having a Dark Lord in your head certainly wasn't 'all right'. "Why?" Harry asked in frustration. "Why is he doing this to me? What is so important about that corridor? It doesn't make any sense."

Sirius and Remus shared another glance before Sirius grabbed Harry's shoulders and met the eyes of the shaken teenager. "Listen Harry, Dumbledore didn't want us to tell you but you need to know," he said ignoring the sneer Snape gave him. "There was a prophecy made concerning Voldemort and it's currently stored in the Department of Mysteries. Voldemort knows a part of it but he's desperate to hear the rest. Prophecy orbs can only be handled by those who the prophecy refers to. That is why Voldemort is giving you the dream of the corridor. He wants your curiosity to get the better of you so you will seek out the prophecy and allow him to know what has been predicted."

The five people in the room gaped at the book.

"Does Voldemort really think Harry is that stupid?" James asked bewildered.

"Apparently," Remus answered.

Harry stared at Sirius in shock. He couldn't believe it. This entire mess was over some stupid prophecy? "That was what he wanted," Harry said more to himself than anything then looked up at Sirius, his eyes pleading for his godfather to tell him it wasn't true. "The prophecy is about him *and me*, isn't it? That's why he wants me to go there. I'm the only one other than him who can touch it."

Sirius could only nod; the simple confirmation that made everything real. Harry's breathing quickened causing Remus to hurry to Harry's side but Harry was too trapped in his own thoughts to notice. There was a prophecy about him...he had a destiny to fulfill...his life had been decided before he had even been born...No. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. There had to be some mistake. He wasn't anything special. He was just Harry. He was just a kid who had been lucky when it counted.

"Here, Lupin," Professor Snape said as he handed over a vial he had pulled out of his robes. "What did you expect his reaction to be? The Headmaster had his reasons for not telling him."

Harry barely felt his body being moved. He was pulled backwards against something firm as his head was tilted back. A liquid was poured into his mouth causing Harry to reflexively swallow. His body instantly relaxed as everything came back into focus. Long fingers wrapped around his wrist and felt for a pulse. Harry slowly blinked at Sirius, unable to trust himself to speak at the moment.

"We know it's a shock, Harry, but you needed to know," Remus said softly. "Please understand that this changes nothing. By learning Occlumency hopefully we can keep Voldemort at bay and keep you safe. Right now your safety is all that matters to us."

Harry didn't know what to feel. The one question he had asked years ago was finally answered. Voldemort had tried to kill him because a prophecy had been made. His parents had been murdered because of it, his life had been cursed because of it and his guardians were now living in a house, invisible to the unknown eye because of it. "What does the prophecy say?" Harry asked quietly then thought better of it. "Never mind. I don't want to know, not as long as he's in my head." Looking up at Professor Snape, Harry knew learning Occlumency wasn't a choice, it was a necessity. "Who will be teaching me?"

"I will be, Potter," Professor Snape said coolly but his voice seemed to lack conviction.

Mrs. Potter huffed and slammed her hand on her thigh.

"Mom?"

"What does Dumbledore have in the place of his brain?" She asked irritated. "That man hates you boys and Dumbledore gives him access into my grandson's mind?" she shrieked.

"She's right. Why doesn't Dumbledore teach himself? I bet he knows Occlumency," Lily nodded and the boys just shrugged.

"The Headmaster gave me this chore so I advise you not to start grumbling about injustices. It is also required that this matter be kept quiet so it would be wise not to brag to all of your friends. Since Black will be on the grounds and everyone knows he's your guardian we will meet in his office. Your first lesson is Monday and six in the evening."

"Wait!" Harry said as Professor Snape turned to leave. He wasn't looking forward to extra lessons with Snape but at least it wasn't Umbridge. Still, Professor Snape wasn't one for patience. The sooner Harry mastered Occlumency the better life would be for everyone. "Is there any books on the subject that I could read to help this along? I'm willing to learn but I need to understand what I'm learning first."

Professor Snape stared at Harry with a raised eyebrow. Clearly that had been the last thing he had expected to hear. "I will provide Lupin with a list of adequate possibilities by tomorrow morning, Potter," he said firmly as he once again turned to leave. "I trust that will be enough time for you to prepare yourself."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. He hated being unprepared and had a feeling that Occlumency was one of those subjects that he didn't want to be unprepared for. "Thank you, sir," Harry said causing Professor Snape to stop in his tracks for a moment before continuing to the fireplace and using the floo network to Hogwarts (one of the few places the fireplace was connected to).

The moment Snape left Harry found himself in the middle of a fierce group hug. Harry just sat there in silence. He was still trying to accept the fact that Voldemort had been in his head for months and he didn't know it. He had been so busy with classes, Quidditch and the D.A. that he didn't notice the signs that something had been wrong. His scar continuously aching, his unsettling dreams and the strange emotions that came out of nowhere. All of it had been Voldemort. *It's always Voldemort.*

Harry couldn't help feeling like royal idiot. So much could have been avoided if he had talked to someone but he had been so determined on doing everything by himself. His attempt to cause fewer problems for the Order only ended up causing more. One thing was for certain, Harry was determined to put a stop to keeping secrets. He had no idea how he was going to handle the Ron and Hermione front but he made a silent vow not to keep anything from Sirius and Remus again. They had been honest with him today and it was up to him to return the favor.

Professor Snape was true to his word and sent Remus a list of four books for Harry to choose from. Harry ended up selecting two: 'Occlumency: A Study of Protecting the Human Mind' and 'The Theory Behind Occlumency' which Remus wasted no time in purchasing at Diagon Alley. Since Sirius had his work cut out for him as the new Defense teacher, it was recommended that Sirius spend as much time as possible preparing for the upcoming term. This left very little time for relaxation for the occupants of Black Manor. That afternoon Harry, Sirius and Remus were packing their trunks for Hogwarts aware that the castle was going to be fairly empty for a few days yet.

Remus had accepted the position as councilor for the time being and would be acting as an impartial party concerning conflicts between students as long as he was properly 'cared for' during the full moons.

"I think you'll do a wonderful job Remus," Lily beamed.

"Yeah, Moony is very perceptive of other people's trouble," Sirius nodded.

"Besides, he helped Harry, so we already know he can help troubled teenagers," James agreed and through all this Remus blushed violently.

It surprised Harry that the Board of Governors and the Wizengamot agreed to Remus' appointment but Harry figured that there were quite a few people who were willing to allow anything to make the entire mess with Umbridge go away. After Rita Skeeter's article the Ministry had received a backlash worse than anything Professor Dumbledore had endured. Many blamed Fudge and the Ministry for Umbridge's behavior since she had been appointed by the Ministry.

Professor Dumbledore hadn't escaped the hearing unscathed either. Several parents threatened to pull their children out of Hogwarts despite Dumbledore's assurances that matters were being taken to prevent any sort of abuse happening at Hogwarts again. Harry was portrayed as brave fighter for standing up against the wrongdoings of the Ministry, something that made Harry groan in annoyance every time he picked up the 'Daily Prophet' to see another editorial. Everyone was just eating up the 'tortured hero' façade. It made Harry wonder if the wizarding world would ever wise up and think for themselves.

"That's very unlikely," Mrs. Potter snorted.

The three wizards arrived in the Headmaster's office through the floo network and were greeted by Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall. Harry was immediately pulled aside by McGonagall and lightly scolded for not confiding in her about Umbridge while Professor Dumbledore quietly talked with Sirius and Remus. Dinner was held in Professor Dumbledore's office since Harry really didn't want to face the remainder of the teaching staff yet. It was a quiet affair until the D.A. was brought up by Sirius. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall were amazed to hear that of the practical study group that had formed under everyone's noses. They were also amazed at how organized the group was and insisted on sitting in at the next meeting with thoughts of having a faculty advisor and making it an official group.

Once dinner was over, Harry, Sirius and Remus retreated to the Marauder Quarters for the evening. Sirius and Remus started working on lesson plans while Harry started reading 'Occlumency: A Study of Protecting the Human Mind'. The concept of Occlumency was simple in theory: by organizing your thoughts and emotions the mind can be easily made into a fortress to protect itself from intrusion when prepared correctly. However the actual process wasn't so easy, especially when the individual had a tendency to act on emotions. That was why Occlumency was so difficult for teenagers to learn. They had yet to gain control of their emotions.

"Then it should be easier for Harry after all he's been bottling up his emotions lately," Sirius said.

"Bottling up and controlling are two completely different things," Remus pointed out. "How many times didn't Harry blow off at his friends this year?"

Sirius shrugged with a grimace.

This just keeps getting better and better.

Harry figured he must have fallen asleep reading because one moment he was trying to stay awake as he read about organizing thoughts while lying on his bed and the next he was covered with a warm blanket with something soft brushing against his face. Opening his eyes, Harry saw a somewhat blurry red and gold figure in front of him. He groggily grabbed his glasses off of the bedside table and slid them on, allowing the blurry form to come into focus.

"Morning, Fawkes," Harry said with a smile. He hadn't seen the phoenix for quite some time. Reaching for the bird, Harry was surprised that Fawkes met his hand and leaned into the teen's touch. "I haven't seen you in a while. Amazing, isn't it?"

Fawkes let out a trill and settled down on Harry's chest, curling up like it was going to sleep. Harry let his eyes close as he continued to mindlessly pet the bird with his right hand. He felt warmth start at his chest and spread through his body. He felt his body relax as his mind started to drift. His hand slowly fell to his side. Harry couldn't move but that didn't bother him. He felt safe, protected and free of worries. Something wet hit the back of his right hand causing a rush of what could only be described as magic flowing through his body. Harry gasped as another drop of wet magic fell on his hand. His breathing quickened as his eyes quickly opened only to see brightness. The soft song of the phoenix filled his ears and his breathing returned to normal. The lighting of the room returned to normal allowing Harry to see Fawkes once again.

"You could have warned me, you know," Harry said with a grin. "What was that?"

Fawkes only trilled and nudged Harry's head to tilt to the right. Looking down, Harry noticed that there was something different about the back of his right hand. It was unmarked. The words 'I must not tell lies' were gone. Harry looked quickly at Fawkes and smiled. Fawkes had removed the last remaining reminder of what Umbridge had put him through. No one would be staring at his hand now because there was nothing to see.

"That was very nice of Fawkes," Mrs. Potter beamed.

"Thanks Fawkes," Harry said as he gently stroked the large bird's feathers. "I really appreciate it."

Fawkes trilled again and nuzzled against Harry's face before taking flight and vanishing with a flash of flames. Now completely awake, Harry pulled himself out of bed prepared for a long day of reading. After cleaning up and straightening up his room, Harry settled on the sofa in

front of the fire with his Occlumency book. It was still fairly early and for all Harry knew Sirius and Remus had been up for most of the night so he figured he would let them sleep.

Surprisingly it was Sirius who was the first to emerge from his room looking like he had been up all night. The Animagus collapsed on the sofa next to Harry and took one look at what the teen was reading before he started grumbling about crazy early risers. Harry couldn't help but smile. It was certainly going to be interesting to see if Sirius could wake early enough for his morning classes on Monday.

"Oh, he manages to do so during term Harry," Remus said.

"Complains from the second he wakes to the second we're in class," James grumbled.

"What's that James?" Sirius asked glaring at James.

"I said, some people like quiet breakfasts," James said slowly.

"Then some people should stay quiet during breakfast instead of being so inhumanly perky at ungodly hours," Sirius responded annoyed.

Without a warning Sirius wrapped an arm around his godson and pulled close. "So what do you want to do today, Pronglet?" Sirius asked with a grin. "We could prank Snape, practice dueling, prank Snape, work on your training, prank Snape, have a snowball fight with Moony—"

"SIRIUS!" Lily scolded.

"What? I can possibly be scolded for pranks I have yet to do!"

"—or prank Snape," Harry finished, picking up on the pattern. "I'm not going to prank Professor Snape, Sirius, especially with him taking time out of his schedule to teach me Occlumency. It's going to be really hard so I can't take the chance of making him angry." Harry glanced over at Sirius with a pleading look on his face. "I need to learn this, Sirius. I don't want Voldemort in my head anymore. I—I was able to control Nagini for a moment in that vision. How do we know Voldemort can't control me?"

"I sure hope he can't," James said worried.

"Harry is being very sensible," Mrs. Potter nodded approvingly.

"Has your scar been hurting lately?" Sirius asked in concern.

Harry shook his head. "Other than the one morning when Voldemort had been really angry I really haven't felt anything," he said truthfully. "I don't know why he's been so quiet but wouldn't it be best to use it to our advantage? If I start learning this now I can keep him out when he tries again. Isn't that what everyone wants?"

Sirius nodded and pulled Harry closer. "I'm really proud of you, Pronglet," he said sincerely. "I honestly thought that we had lost you when we took you home after your vision. You were so afraid of us...I just didn't know what to do. How did you handle it all without any of your roommates finding out?"

"Silencing charms," Harry answered honestly and let out a sigh. "I know I was a mess. The nightmares I had were so real that it took me a while to realize that it wasn't. Deep down I knew you and Remus would never side with Umbridge but after hearing her rant for so long I guess some of it sticks with you..." Harry rested his fingers on his chest, feeling the pendants that were hidden underneath his shirt. They still felt as warm as they had when he received them Christmas morning. "...but not anymore. Ever since we talked, I haven't had a nightmare. I'm currently nightmare-free which is a little strange but a welcomed change. I think standing up to Umbridge also helped."

Sirius grinned. "Moony told me about that," he said. "*Psychotic Ministry fanatics*? Where did you ever learn such words?" He laughed when Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I doubt that Umbridge even knew what they meant but you have a point. She is psychotic. How the Ministry finds these people is beyond me."

"Corruption," Mrs. Potter said grimly. "Doing favors to friends."

"I vote for poor management," Harry said seriously which sent Sirius into intense bark-like laughter.

The next two days were a mixture of work and...well...work. When Sirius and Remus were arranging lesson plans while Harry either finished his homework or read his Occlumency books. During that time the Marauder Quarters were so quiet it was eerie. When Sirius became too overwhelmed with the 'teacher responsibilities', however, he usually pulled Harry along for some training in the Room of Requirement. The sessions didn't last long, just long enough for Sirius to release enough stress in order to get back to work.

Sirius and Remus had been both surprised and grateful when Harry had told them Fawkes had healed his hand. Most of their surprise came from the fact that they were shocked they hadn't thought of it themselves. They were well aware of Fawkes' protective nature over Harry so the fact that Fawkes used his tears to heal Harry wasn't thought to be odd for the Phoenix. The gratefulness was so that no one would be staring at the wound out of curiosity just like the teachers (and students who had remained at Hogwarts over the holiday) had tried to do during dinner in the Great Hall. It had been nerve-wracking to have nearly the entire teaching staff staring at you but Harry had managed knowing that when the student body arrived it was only going to be worse.

The Heads of the Houses were wasting no time in fulfilling the Ministry's requests and had agreed on talking with the students in their houses about abuse and Remus' new position at Hogwarts after dinner the night they arrived. To prevent the stares Harry knew he was going to receive from the Gryffindor House, he would be spending the night in his room in the Marauder Quarters, something that probably wouldn't settle well with Ron and Hermione since Harry had yet to talk to them. He knew that a long explanation was in order and also knew that Ron and Hermione wouldn't be too patient about receiving it.

Before Harry knew it the Hogwarts Express had arrived and students were starting to file into the Great Hall. Harry was sitting at the Gryffindor table with Sirius and Remus talking quietly when he was nearly tackled by Hermione and Ginny who had come running in with Ron, Fred and George following in at a brisk pace. Sirius and Remus bid Harry good luck before taking their spots at the Head Table.

"And he is going to need it," Remus said sagely.

As Hermione and the Weasleys took their seats there was a constant stream of greeters asking the same questions over and over again. What happened? Was he okay? What had Umbridge done to him? What happened at the hearing? After the tenth person Harry wanted to scream but he bit his tongue and kept saying he didn't want to talk about it until Professor Dumbledore stood up to make a speech, the hall instantly silencing for him.

"To those of you who had left over the holidays, welcome back," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "As you may have heard we have made some changes amongst our staff. Professor Umbridge has been removed from her position permanently and has been replaced by Professor Sirius Black." Excited cheers and applause broke out causing Sirius to grin.

"Oh see, you are already getting comfortable with being a te-"

"LILY! Don't say it!" Sirius cried.

"In addition, Remus Lupin has agreed to return to Hogwarts as an advisor in the instances that you are uncomfortable in speaking to a member of the staff. Anything you say to Mr. Lupin will be kept confidential so please feel free to seek him out whenever you need someone to talk to. Also, after dinner students are required to go directly to their common rooms for a meeting with your Heads of Houses. Now, let the feast begin."

Food appeared on the tables as everyone slowly broke out of their shock and began to eat. Unfortunately for Harry he turned to the table to see the waiting eyes of everyone around him. He hadn't realized it before but the entire Quidditch team had managed to sit nearby along with Neville, Dean and Seamus. This was going to be interesting. "What?" Harry asked innocently.

Hermione was the first to find her voice. "Spill, Harry," she said quietly. "What did Umbridge do to you? We haven't heard anything from you the entire holiday; even after Rita Skeeter's article in the 'Daily Prophet' do you have any idea how worried we've been about you?"

"Very tactful," Mrs. Potter snorted.

"Hermione doesn't do tact Mrs. P," Remus flinched.

Harry let out a sigh as he rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. This really wasn't the place he wanted to talk about this but knew that no one would let it rest until he said something. "You haven't heard anything from me because I've been busy," Harry said in a hushed voice. "I was sick for a few days, then it was Christmas, *then* I had to prepare for the hearing, *then* I had to come here early so Siri—er—Professor Black could prepare his lessons, and *then* you all arrived. I haven't really had a lot of free time to send letters to everyone to settle their curiosity over a private matter that was going to be discussed in a few days anyways."

James chuckled.

"James, this is not funny!" Lily scolded.

"Professor Black!" James said through his chuckles and Lily, Remus and Mrs. P joined him. Sirius huffed and glared.

Hermione blushed and looked away while apologizing. Harry knew she was just worried but she could have been a little more tactful in her questioning. Yes, Hermione was a brilliant

witch and Harry loved her like he loved the rest of his 'family' but listening to her demanding tone reminded Harry of how she had orchestrated the D.A. before the Council had taken over leadership. Hermione needed to learn patience, especially while her thirst for knowledge overruled her common sense.

"As far as why Umbridge was removed, I suppose everyone's going to know by tomorrow so there's no point in keeping it to myself," Harry continued. "I didn't lie when I said Umbridge was having me write lines in detention. I just neglected to mention that it was with a blood quill—" Everyone around him gasped in shock, "—while she tried to convince me what an attention-seeking liar I was."

"B—but blood quills are illegal!" George exclaimed in a hushed voice. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Good question George!" James said pained. "And for all the explanation Harry has already given I still can't believe he didn't tell his guardians!"

"Because I didn't know," Harry said honestly. "I was raised by muggles. It also didn't help that I used to be my uncle's punching bag whenever he was angry but let's not go into that. It isn't like there's a class of things you should know concerning types of abuse in the wizarding world for those raised by muggles." Harry started piling food on his plate trying desperately to ignore the looks of pity he was getting. "Besides, Umbridge is a complete nutter. We're just waiting for St. Mungo's to declare it officially."

Everyone started eating, breaking off into their own conversations but they kept glancing over at Harry as if they were making sure that he was indeed all right. Thankfully Neville and Ginny started talking to Harry about the D.A. and the next Council meeting which served as a distraction until dinner was called to an end. After explaining that he wouldn't be spending the night in the dorms, Harry left with Sirius and Remus for the Marauder Quarters. He was already dreading tomorrow. It was going to be an extremely long day.

"Sure will," Sirius agreed.

--

Loved all my reviews and sorry for being so late in updating!

Not mine.

Chapter 20

Occlumency

It was extremely early the following morning when Remus pulled Sirius out of bed. What started as a friendly wake up call quickly turned to a 'hex war' forcing Harry to run for cover which ended up being anywhere besides Marauder Quarters.

"Well honestly, Moony should have known better," Sirius huffed.

"But Cissus, someone had to wake you!" Remus whined.

"DO NOT CALL ME CISSUS!"

Luckily Harry had already changed into his uniform so all he had to do was grab his schoolbag that was already filled with what he would need for the day's classes before hurrying to the Great Hall.

Surprisingly there were a few students already eating breakfast at the Ravenclaw table although they all looked a little on the tired side. At the Head Table, Professors McGonagall, Snape and Flitwick were seated also looking slightly drained. Harry had to wonder how the talks had gone last night but judging from the state the three Heads of Houses were in they didn't go smoothly. He had figured that the talk with the Gryffindors would have been difficult since a part of the lecture included speaking up when someone you know is being mistreated. It was bound to be taken personally since no one in the Gryffindor House had said a word of how Umbridge had acted towards Harry.

Sitting down at the Gryffindor table, Harry started to mindlessly pile food on his plate. He was nervous about his first Occlumency lesson tonight as well as his first Defense class with Sirius. The Animagus was a good teacher but certainly had his own way of doing things. The 'hands on' approach that Sirius preferred was the complete opposite of Umbridge. Sirius had been disgusted with the book Umbridge had assigned and bluntly stated that he would most likely have to start from scratch for all years to repair the damage. *How can one person cause so much damage in such little time?*

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts as Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny sat down around him. They all looked half-asleep still which made Harry wonder what had indeed happened last night. The talk shouldn't have been *that* bad. "Er—rough night?" Harry asked curiously.

Ron looked at Harry and sighed. "There had been a lot of questions," he admitted. "By the time we got to the Tower everyone had heard about the blood quill but not many knew what it was. You were right, Harry. There isn't exactly a way to learn about illegal artifacts unless you personally research them. McGonagall told us about the different types of abuse and that was something I definitely could have lived without learning. I mean...who could be that sick to do something like that to a kid?"

"You'd be surprised," Mrs. Potter said grimly.

"You'd be surprised," Harry muttered causing everyone around him to stare in shock. "Not to me!" he exclaimed causing everyone to relax. "I meant that it does happen, at least in the muggle world.

"In the Wizarding World too. Do you think all Death Eaters join because of the 'cause'?" Sirius said. "No, I bet that's just a few of them. A lot join because they like to cause suffering and it doesn't have to be only in adults."

That's why people tell their kids never to wander off and don't talk to strangers. Not all predators are animals, Ron...er—maybe they are they just don't all look like animals."

"I guess Moody wasn't kidding when he lectured about constant vigilance," Ginny said causing quite a few people to nod in agreement. "So...Harry, what can we expect from Professor Black?"

James and Remus laughed insanely and Sirius glared at them.

Everyone's faces turned from downcast to eager as Harry smiled. "It certainly won't be anything like Umbridge," Harry said honestly. "He'll probably try to find out how much everyone knows this week before actually teaching anything. Since he knows about the D.A.—"

"WHAT!"

Harry was surprised at the collective outburst then remembered that he had forgotten to mention it last night with everything else that had been going on. "I told Sirius and Remus

about the D.A. before the hearing,” he said with a shrug. “Sirius wasn’t a teacher then so I didn’t think it would be a big deal if he knew. Remus approved of the group and Sirius was a little upset that we were defying the Ministry without him knowing about it.”

Fred and George grinned. “Spoken like a true Marauder,” George said proudly. “I still can’t believe we are actually learning from a Marauder—and Sirius Black no less!”

“Excuse me?” Remus said offended. “What do you call me?”

“They didn’t know you were a Marauder when you taught, Moony. Now they know Sirius is one. Besides, you have that bookworm vibe. No one suspects you of being a Marauder,” Lily tried to pacify him.

“Yeah, wolf in sheep’s clothing,” James chuckled and Sirius burst out laughing.

“It’s not that good a joke!” Remus cried but the other two laughed harder.

Harry looked at George with a raised eyebrow. That had been something he hadn’t expected to hear. He knew Fred and George idolized the Marauders but Harry really didn’t like the way George was speaking. How many others were thinking of Sirius as the Azkaban escapee turned celebrity instead of the actual Sirius Black? “May I remind you that you’ve already been taught by Remus who is also a former Marauder?” Harry asked. “And don’t you dare let him hear you speaking about him like that. He’s nervous enough as it is.”

“Aw, Harry is looking out for Padfoot!” James cooed. “How cute!”

“Why are you nervous Sirius?” Lily asked twitching her lips. “Afraid you’ll have to give yourself detention?”

“Ha, ha!” Sirius drawled bored. “Very funny.”

Fred and George nodded and returned to their attention to their plates. Harry knew many overlooked Remus’ past at Hogwarts because he was so sensible so he didn’t take any offense to the comment George made. He was just extremely defensive of his guardians and the skewed opinions the wizarding world had of them, especially with everything that had happened recently.

Ron turned and looked directly at Harry with a serious look on his face. “You’re okay, right?” he asked. “Mum and Dad told us not to say anything so if you don’t want to talk about it you don’t have to. I guess I just want to make sure you’re—er—well—”

"—okay?" Harry offered causing Ron to smile slightly. "I'm fine and I mean it. Sirius and Remus helped me work through it all. I also think confronting her at the hearing helped too. I'm sorry I hid it all but I honestly thought I was doing the right thing and I didn't think there was anything anyone could do. For all I knew Umbridge had the Ministry behind her. Fudge claims that he didn't know about the quill but he knew she was singling me out in an attempt to force the 'Ministry Perspective' on me."

"You still should have told us, Harry," Hermione offered gently. "We would have found a way to help you even if it was just emotional support."

Ron glanced at Harry's right hand before looking at Harry in confusion. It didn't take a mastermind to know what he was looking for. "Er—so, what happened to the scar?" he asked curiously. "Bill told us he saw it and it looked painful."

Harry glanced at the unmarked skin on the back of the right hand. "Fawkes healed it for me one morning," he said with a shrug. "I'm glad. I didn't need a constant reminder of it all." He looked at those around him to see a mixture of sympathy and amazement. "Honestly, I'm fine. Umbridge can't come anywhere near me and we don't have to sit through her poor excuse of classes."

"That's good but it doesn't excuse what happened, Harry," Fred said seriously. "You're a part of our family which means it's our job to look out for our younger siblings." He glanced at George who nodded before continuing. "We know it's different now that your guardians here and everything but we're here if you need us."

"Aw," Lily cooed.

"At least they know that with Remus and Sirius there things are different," Mrs. Potter nodded.

"Hopefully they won't get angry because Harry comes to us and not to his friends," Remus said.

"Because you know there are some things you just can't talk to an adult about," George added with a grin.

"Did he just call Sirius an adult?" James asked.

"Yes," Sirius answered in a pained tone. "They keep saying that! Don't they realize I will always be young at heart?"

"Good morning, Professor!" Hermione said causing everyone to quickly look up and see Sirius walking towards Harry.

"Good morning, Hermione," Sirius said with a smile

"What are you smiling about?" Sirius shrieked. "She just insulted you!"

"No she didn't," Remus said calmly.

"Yes she did!"

"No she didn't."

"Yes."

"No."

"Huh, huh!"

"Nuh, huh."

"Give it up Remus," Mrs. Potter chuckled. "You won't win."

as he stopped behind Harry and gave the teen's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I will admit that it probably will take a while before I'm used to being called a Professor. And Harry, I will need your assistance later for a little payback against Moony since you decided to abandon me this morning when he started hexing me."

Harry smirked at the memory. "I seem to remember you returned as many hexes as you received," he said casually. "You're just upset because Remus fought as dirty as you usually do."

"Aw, our Moony is learning," James said fondly. "Finally!"

"Me?" Sirius said in mock offense causing several people nearby to snicker at the banter between the two. "Fight dirty? Never! I fight to win. There's a difference, Harry. Fighting dirty is going for the cheap shots when you don't have to. Fighting to win is using any means necessary to defeat your opponent."

"Exactly," Sirius nodded. "There is nothing wrong with that. And Remus is too proper."

"Well, I can't do anything if I actually have good manners," Remus huffed.

"You were hexing each other," James moaned. "Manners have no place in hexing!"

Harry let out a snort. Sometimes it was best to just accept 'Sirius logic' no matter how illogical it sounded. "Yep, that was about as clear as mud," he said sarcastically. "If you want revenge against Remus then fine but you're on your own. I value my life and getting in the middle of a prank war is not my idea of a cup of tea."

"Prank war!" Fred asked eagerly. "Where can we sign up?"

"Hey! That's three against one! No fair!" Remus cried.

"In war and love everything is fair my dear Moony," Sirius said in a sing song voice.

Lily eyed him and then moved close to Remus and whispered fervently in his ear.

"Huh, huh...good idea...yeah," Remus kept saying as he glared at Sirius. Satisfied Lily went back to her seat. Sirius watched both of them warily and Remus smirked evilly at him.

Sirius smiled mischievously at the twins. "We'll talk later," he said with a wink and gave Harry's shoulder another squeeze before releasing. "Have fun today, all of you, and I'm looking forward to seeing your lot in class today, kiddo." Everyone bid an excited farewell as Sirius made his way to the Head Table.

Soon enough the time for classes to begin drew near and everyone departed the Great Hall for their first class of the day. After an unbelievably boring History of Magic, Harry had to endure Double Potions with Professor Snape who was surprisingly quiet. He didn't make nearly as many comments about incompetent dunderheads as he normally did. Thankfully there had been no cauldrons that exploded which would have guaranteed a colorful outburst from Snape.

"Well with Snivellus not making them tremble in fear they make less mistakes," James said flatly.

"I have to agree that some will be more confident but in an explosive class as Potions the fact that they fear their teacher might actually help them do their best to avoid mistakes."

"MOM! This is Snivellus we're talking about!"

"Exactly," Lily agreed. "He isn't a nice person so he won't be nurturing. Like Slughorn is. In Slughorn's class people try their best because they want to impress him. Who would want to impress Snape? So he has this tactic. It's not pleasant and has some drawbacks, like insecure people will actually make more mistakes, but if he actually explained things it could work. The problem is Snape doesn't. He just belittles them."

Divination dragged on considerably with Harry and Ron trying desperately not to laugh at Professor Trelawney predicting Umbridge's demise although everyone had to admit that they had never seen the Divination teacher so happy before. It was probably the first class in a long while that Trelawney hadn't predicted Harry's painful death so all in all it was a good class, at least it should have been but it just felt wrong.

Finally the time for Defense Against the Dark Arts had arrived. Entering the classroom, Harry had to smile at the sight of Sirius sitting on the teacher's desk as he flipped through 'Defensive Magical Theory' by Wilbert Slinkhard. Ron pulled Harry to seats in the front of the classroom, eager for class to begin. Sirius glanced up at Harry and winked before returning his attention to the book. Soon enough the classroom had filled and class had begun.

"Right-o," Sirius said as he jumped off the desk and closed the book. "Good afternoon! As you all have already heard, I'm your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Sirius Black. Now, we have quite a bit to cover if all of you are going to be ready for your OWLs and if this rubbish is what you've been learning then I certainly have my work cut out for me." Sirius walked over to the rubbish bin and dropped the book in it. "According to the OWL guidelines you will be given two exams: one theoretical and one practical. Mondays we will be working on the theory behind the spells and Thursdays we will be working on the spells by means of dueling dummies and dueling with each other."

Excited whispers broke out throughout the classroom before Sirius silenced them with a patient look. "As for today, I'm afraid class won't be very exciting," Sirius continued as he stood in front of his desk. "Everyone, please take out some parchment, ink and a quill. For the next twenty minutes, I need all of you to describe your experience in the area of defense and I need you to be completely honest." Sirius glanced at Ron and Hermione who looked slightly sheepish. "I need to know what you know so I can prepare you all properly. It is pointless to teach you advanced spells if you haven't grasped the basics."

Everyone did as they were told. Harry was about to follow suit when Sirius moved to Harry's side. "You don't have to do this, Pronglet," Sirius whispered in Harry's ear. "Instead, I need you to write down who's in your group and what you've covered, all right?"

Harry nodded and started making his lists. He already knew what Sirius was planning. Since the D.A. didn't include everyone, there were going to be a wide variety of levels. Once the time was up everyone handed in their parchment and Sirius quickly looked through them before sorting them into two piles. He then took the larger pile and fingered through them before returning his complete attention to the students.

"Well, let's get started..."

That evening at dinner those who had sat through a Defense class with Sirius couldn't say enough about the new teacher.

"Such a good teacher," Lily gushed.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Very professional," Mrs. Potter nodded.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Very adult," Remus agreed.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"How long are we allowed to torture him like this?" James asked eagerly.

For the first time students seemed excited about receiving schoolwork which just seemed wrong but after Umbridge and her lessons students were happy to actually learn something. The fifth years had an essay due on Thursday on a hex, spell, or charm used in dueling meant to help them with the practical lesson on Thursday, something that every fifth year Gryffindor was still talking excitedly about.

Harry ate quickly while he took all of the chatter around him. He had a little under an hour before his first Occlumency lesson and to say he was nervous would be an understatement. He had read almost half of the first book but still didn't have a clear idea of how to actually organize his thoughts and create the fortress to protect his mind from Voldemort. Realistically Harry needed more time but Professor Snape wasn't one to grant favors, especially since the Potions Master was already taking time out of his schedule to help someone he wasn't too fond of.

At half past five Harry had finished eating and bid farewell to Ron and Hermione before leaving for Sirius' office. As far as they knew he was spending some time with his guardians, something that Ron and Hermione hadn't been too thrilled to hear. Harry didn't miss the disappointed looks on Ron and Hermione's faces. They were still hoping to hear what had happened at the hearing just like everyone else.

Having Sirius and Remus at Hogwarts was going to take some adjusting. Harry's first instinct was to run to Sirius and Remus when he needed to talk about something, not Ron and Hermione. With everything that had happened Harry just felt more comfortable turning to his guardians than his friends. He knew it had a lot to do with the fact that Sirius and Remus knew everything now unlike Ron and Hermione. Harry knew he had to find a way to tell them about his outbursts but the same couldn't be said for his Occlumency lessons. Professor Snape had been clear that it had to remain a secret.

Reaching the Sirius' office, Harry let out a breath then knocked on the door only to jump back when the door opened a moment later to reveal Sirius' smiling face. Harry tried to smile back but knew it wasn't sincere. Sirius must have noticed Harry's nervousness because with one motion he had Harry in his office with an arm around the teen's shoulders. The decorum of the room had certainly changed. There was absolutely nothing with a cat on it in the room.

"Of course not! I'm a dog!"

"You know, most people wouldn't bellow that away like that," Lily pointed out.

"Padfoot is not like most people," James said wisely.

"No, I'm unique," Sirius said puffing his chest.

"Yes you are Cissus," Remus patted Sirius' shoulder and received a glare for his comment.

Instead, there were shelves of books where there had been plates and over the fireplace was the painting Harry had given Sirius and Remus for Christmas. It certainly looked a lot better than before.

Harry sat down in front of Sirius' desk, dropping his schoolbag on the floor in the process. "So how was the first day, Professor?" he asked curiously.

"HARRY!" Sirius cried.

Sirius scowled before ruffling Harry's hair. "Please don't call me that any more than you have to," he pleaded. "Just hearing 'Professor Black' is enough to make me cringe. Moony's having a lot of fun with this.

"Oh, I so am," Remus said wiping tears of laughter away.

I'm still trying to think of an adequate prank to pay him back for this morning."

The sound of the door opening quickly startled both Harry and Sirius causing them both to grab their wands as they turned to the door. They relaxed a moment later when Remus came running in with a piece of parchment in his hand and a smile on his face. "Dumbledore just got word on Umbridge!" Remus said happily. "St. Mungo's deemed her mentally competent. She was just sentenced to two years in Azkaban for casting an Unforgivable and two more years for her treatment towards you, Harry, here. Madam Bones has also started an investigation to determine Fudge's role in everything. We won!"

"What?" James asked annoyed.

"That's good James," Mrs. Potter said happily and the others nodded.

"Am I the only one that remembers that performing an Unforgivable in another human being gets you life in Azkaban, not two years?" James asked crossing his arms.

"As I said, she attempted to cast but did not succeed. Attempt does not constitute performing an Unforgivable," Mrs. Potter explained and James huffed.

Harry stared at Remus in confusion as he put his wand back in his holster. "So they just proved Umbridge was sane so they could take her to a place that would make her insane," he

concluded then shook his head when Sirius and Remus nodded. "That's messed up. Azkaban can have her for all I care but that just doesn't make any sense to me."

Sirius chuckled as he pulled Harry into an embrace. "Maybe not but it's what she deserves," he said truthfully. "Well, legally that's what she deserves. I just wish we could have had five minutes—"

"—Sirius," Remus warned. "Don't give Harry any ideas."

There was an overabundance of green flames that quickly ended the conversation followed by Professor Snape stepping out of the fireplace. He took one look at the scene before him and sneered but remained silent as he enfolded his arms across his chest. The silent message clearly stated that Professor Snape had the floor now, family bonding later.

"Good evening, Severus," Remus said with a nod then looked at Harry and Sirius. "I'll catch up with you two later. Don't cause problems, Sirius."

"Why does everyone assume I'm going to cause problems?" Sirius asked in exasperation.

Four incredulous pairs of eyes stared at Sirius.

Silence. Remus and Harry just looked at Sirius while Professor Snape's glare narrowed.

"Fine!" Sirius said as he walked to his desk and sat down, looking like a child sulking.

Remus shook his head and bid farewell before leaving the room. Taking in a nervous breath, Harry turned to Professor Snape who was still glaring at Sirius. *This may be a problem.* Both Sirius and Professor Snape had their grudges against each other. Harry just wished they wouldn't look like they were about to hex each other to death. It was extremely intimidating.

"One word, Black, and you'll be forced to leave," Professor Snape warned. "Let's not forget I'm here to help save your precious godson's *fragile* mind."

Sirius inhaled sharply as he glared back at Professor Snape. "Just give me a reason, Snape," he spat. "I have no problem taking my revenge against Umbridge out on you."

"Yeah Snivellus," Sirius said dangerously. "One tiny little reason."

Harry's shoulders slumped as he reached into his schoolbag and pulled out his Occlumency book out. This certainly wasn't the start he had been hoping for. "Sir," Harry said addressing

Professor Snape. "I understand the organizing of thoughts helps increase the defenses but so far I don't understand how something so simple could create a barrier against a mental attack. I spent months keeping my emotions controlled yet Voldemort still was in my head."

Professor Snape turned his attention to Harry. "First rule, Potter," he spat. "You will not say the Dark Lord's name." Harry just blinked at Snape unable to think of anything to say. That was something he hadn't been expecting from the spy for the Order. "You are correct. Actually creating the 'barrier' as you call it around your mind isn't as simple as that book depicts it. You must shut down feelings and memories so those who have mastered Legilimency, such as the Dark Lord, can not detect lying or even intrude into one's mind. You do know what Legilimency is, correct?"

Harry nodded as he set his book down. He had read that Legilimency is what is used to penetrate the mind locate memories and feelings or even plant false impressions such as what Voldemort had been doing to him. He had also read that eye contact was essential for Legilimency but the link with Harry's scar made Harry a special case. *Just like everything else.*

Professor Snape pulled up a chair. "Sit down, Potter," he instructed and waited for Harry to comply. "Now, you need to clear your mind of all thought and emotion." Harry started to close his eyes. "Keep your eyes open, Potter. Concentrate on clearing your mind."

Harry stared at Professor Snape as he let his mind blank out. He pushed his worries and fears aside, they could not help him now. For a moment it felt like nothing was changing as Harry stared into Snape's black eyes thinking of absolutely nothing. His calming techniques entered his mind. *Concentrate on the simple things: breathing and your heart beat.* Harry felt his body relax as he continued to stare forward. He didn't notice Professor Snape pulling out his wand. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

"*Legilimens!*" Professor Snape said softly.

A white fog quickly blocked Harry's vision as he felt something pulling him into one direction but not a definite one. Harry fought to concentrate only on his breathing until the fog quickly dispersed and he found himself being thrown in his room at Privet Drive. "*You ungrateful freak!*" shouted Uncle Vernon as Harry landed on the floor and looked up at his Uncle in fear. "*How dare you give your freaky friends our number! I'm going to teach you respect, you pathetic little brat if it's the last thing I do!*"

No...No...NO! He didn't want anyone to know about that! It was bad enough that everyone knew something had happened. They didn't need to know the details. Harry forced himself to turn his head and look away, instantly breaking the connection. His breathing was slightly labored as he grabbed hold of the chair to stop himself from falling off it. He felt a hand on his back as another tilted his head so he met Professor Snape's eyes again.

"That was quite good," Mrs. Potter nodded.

"But Snape saw Harry's mind!" Sirius cried.

"But Harry managed to kick him out as soon as he saw something Harry didn't want to," Mrs. Potter said. "That's very hard to do. Though Snape is being quite obvious about his attack. A Legilimens wanting information will probably be sneaky and not let the person know he is performing Legilimency."

"That was fairly impressive for a first try, Potter," Professor Snape said coolly.

"Did Snivellus just compliment Harry?" James asked shocked.

"Sirius what are you doing?" Lily asked.

"Checking if this storm isn't actually the end of the world," Sirius said as he peered out the window.

"You managed to elude the spell for nearly five minutes but you failed none the less. The Dark Lord will not hesitate to grab for your most painful memories to weaken you." Professor Snape took a step back and eyed Harry suspiciously. "Potter, did anyone ever talk to you concerning the colorful language your uncle used against you?"

"Yes, what do you think? That me and Padfoot are two morons?" Remus asked annoyed.

"He probably does," Lily nodded.

Harry looked away again and noticed that Sirius was kneeling beside him with a concerned look on his face. Remus had been rather insistent on assuring Harry that Vernon Dursley had been wrong to call Harry a 'freak' and a 'burden'. Harry knew his uncle had been wrong to take his anger out on him. He knew that his relatives were wrong to treat him like dirt. What else was there to talk about?

Professor Snape let out a frustrated sigh as he rubbed his eyes. "Well I can't say I'm surprised," he muttered. "You Gryffindors do tend to miss the obvious. Potter, did you ever

wonder how Umbridge knew what to say that would bring back the doubts instilled upon you from living with your relatives? She obviously talked to him. Her *verbal abuse* was only a continuation of your uncle's. It certainly explains why you never said anything to anyone."

Sirius let out a sigh as he stood up and gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "We can talk about it later," he said softly then glared at Snape. "You had to go for the most traumatizing memory you could find!"

Professor Snape glanced at Sirius before returning his gaze to Harry. "Again, Potter," he said coolly. "Black, back off." Sirius glared at Snape before walking back to his desk and sitting down. "Once again, Potter."

Harry desperately tried to push the memory of his uncle out of his mind and forced himself to concentrate on his breathing and only his breathing. *Breathe in, breathe out.* It was the past and the past couldn't hurt him anymore. *Breathe in, breathe out.* Vernon Dursley was in jail. *Breathe in, breathe out.* Harry felt his body relax as he stared straight ahead but not actually seeing anything. He was accustomed to retreating into his mind this year. It had been the only way to survive the detentions with Umbridge without acting out.

"*Legilimens!*" Professor Snape said again.

Once again a white fog settled in as Harry started to feel himself being tugged into multiple directions at the same time. He tried to break free of the invisible hands but they wouldn't release him. He tried to break free but the invisible hands tightened their grip and continued to pull him. Harry started to panic, crying out in frustration as he tried to break free. The fog started to disperse as voices filled his head.

"*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*"

"*Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now...*"

Green light flashed before him and then the scene changed. Harry found himself standing in front of Quirrell and blocked off from escape by towering flames...he was in the Chamber as a teenage Tom Riddle revealed he was actually Voldemort...he tied to the headstone at the graveyard as Voldemort approached...he was dueling Voldemort as the third outburst hit him, causing unbelievable pain...

STOP! STOP IT!

"YES! STOP!" James yelled as he rubbed Lily's back who was sobbing. Mrs. Potter had taken her hanky out too.

Suddenly Harry found himself back in Sirius' office with his wand in hand and Professor Snape on his knees, wincing in pain in front of him.

"Serves him right," Sirius mumbled.

Harry instantly paled as he dropped his wand and fell out of his chair before quickly backing away until he hit the wall. What had he done? He didn't even remember arming himself. Harry stared with wide eyes as Sirius crouched down in front of him, blocking Professor Snape from the teen's line of sight.

"Harry, calm down," Sirius said gently. "It's okay. You were just defending yourself. Snape knows that. You did nothing wrong." He moved his head so his eyes met Harry's. "No harm done, all right kiddo? You wanted him out so you forced him out."

"However using a powerful Stinging Hex wasn't the most desirable method to go about it," Professor Snape growled as he stood up. "You fought harder this time, Potter, however you let me see too much before you pushed me out. You must keep fighting every step of the way. Again."

"Give him a moment, Snape!" Sirius spat as he helped Harry to his feet then turned to the Potions Master appearing to be ready to duel if he had to. "I'd like to see anyone function with you poking around in their head!"

"How is anyone supposed to learn anything when they are treated like a helpless infant," Snape shot back. "Enjoy playing the 'mother hen', Black? I must say the role suits you rather well."

"Oh, I so wanna hex him!" James growled.

"Enough!" Harry shouted as he pulled free of Sirius' hold and moved so he was standing between the two grown wizards. He knew that unless he did something now Sirius and Professor Snape would start cursing each other. "Let's just get this over with before you two kill each other."

Snape's scowled and pointed his wand at Harry. "Fine," he spat. "Get ready. One...two...three...Legilimens!"

Harry had barely time to even begin pushing away his emotions before the spell hit. Once again Harry's vision clouded as he felt himself being pulled into different directions by invisible hands. He instantly started to fight to break free of the strong hold on his body and tried to create a wall to block the hands that kept pulling at him, pestering him for something that he was determined not to give. He couldn't afford to.

Darkness began to creep in from the corners of his vision as distant voices echoed in his ears. He couldn't make out what was being said and he didn't want to. Wanting to know would only allow Professor Snape access to his memories. Harry fought to keep the fog. He fought to break free. His breathing started to quicken as sweat started to roll down the sides of his face. He could feel himself weakening as the darkness increased, swirling around him...consuming him.

Harry was five-years-old, huddled in his cupboard under the stairs trying desperately to hide from Dudley and his gang...he was nearly thirteen outside Number 4, Privet Drive, meeting *Midnight* for the first time...he was fourteen and hiding in the Owlery after being announced the fourth champion...he was fifteen and bandaging his hand in one of the bathrooms after a detention with Umbridge...

No! Stop it! Stop it!

The memories quickly faded into darkness as Harry realized that his eyes were closed and he was shivering uncontrollably as Sirius held him tightly. Opening his eyes, Harry noticed that Professor Snape was putting his wand away. Ignoring the exhaustion that was settling in, Harry pulled himself free and moved to stand up again, ready to face Professor Snape again. Sirius quickly helped Harry stand before ushering him to the nearest chair.

"I believe that is all you can manage tonight, Potter," Professor Snape said in his usual drawl. "You are still allowing me to see too much once I access your memories. For your first lesson, it wasn't as dismal as it could have been. You show some promise but you must continue to work at it. You must practice ridding your mind of emotion every night before sleep, understand Potter? Every night."

"Why can't he just say Harry did well? Why does he have to make it out as insult?" Remus asked annoyed.

"Yes sir," Harry said tiredly.

"We will meet again on Wednesday to continue," Professor Snape said firmly.

"I can't, sir," Harry said nervously. "I have Council meetings on Wednesday nights. With the staff coming to the next D.A. meeting we need—"

"—yes, I heard about your little group," Professor Snape said impatiently. "Thursday then, same time. I expect to see some progress, Potter."

Harry nodded and watched as Professor Snape approached the fireplace, grabbed a handful of powder out of the nearby vase and threw it at the fire before he stepped in and vanished.

Daring a glance at Sirius, Harry knew his godfather wanted to say something but the problem was Harry was just too exhausted to deal with the past at the moment. He had more pressing matters than understanding that being called a 'freak' by his relatives was verbal abuse.

Keeping Voldemort out of his head, classes, schoolwork, Quidditch, and the D.A. were more important at the moment.

"But making sure you know that what your Uncle said was rubbish is important Harry!" Lily cried.

After assuring Sirius that he would talk about matters of the past when he wasn't so backlogged, Harry hurried back to the Gryffindor Tower to start his schoolwork. It was still early so unfortunately the Common Room was full of people. Harry managed to dodge questions, insisting that he had assignments to finish. Ron and Hermione jumped in to help and in no time Harry was caught up with what he needed to be before calling it a night.

Retreating up to his dorm, Harry focused on clearing his mind as he changed into his pajamas and crawled into bed. He could already feel sleep taking him when an overwhelming rush of what could only be described as joy filled him. Harry quickly fought against the feeling, trying desperately to push it away and eventually did but the joy was soon replaced by his own dread. It was never a good sign when Voldemort was feeling that happy.

"Definitely not a good sign," Mrs. Potter said grimly.

"Does anyone find it interesting that old Voldie is all chuffed right after Snivellus has open access to Harry's mind?" Sirius asked innocently.

"Sirius, we've been through this. Snape is on our side!" Lily scolded.

"Says he," Sirius mumbled.

--

A/N- Thank you all for reading and reviewing.

Not mine

Chapter 21

Evaluation of the Defense Association

Harry pulled himself out of bed with great reluctance the following morning. His head ached and he felt like he hadn't slept at all. He didn't know how he managed to clean up and change into his uniform without waking his dorm mates but he was grateful that he did. The last time he was this lethargic was when he had the vision of Nagini attacking Mr. Weasley and he certainly didn't want anyone thinking he had another one of *those* dreams.

"See?" Sirius cried. "Look how he gets after just one session of Snivellus probing in his head!"

"Sirius," Lily said annoyed. "I will not repeat myself. Snape is on our side. Dumbledore trusts him."

"Maybe he shouldn't," Sirius mumbled annoyed.

After grabbing his schoolbag and filled it with what he would need for the day, Harry left for the Great Hall and another day of grueling classes. The halls were quiet and empty urging Harry to look at his watch to see that it was only half past six. No wonder he was so tired. Harry let out a groan as he continued walking. Well, at least he could read some more in his Occlumency book before the Great Hall became too crowded.

It was about three quarters of an hour before anyone from Gryffindor entered the Great Hall allowing Harry to read at least a chapter before stashing the book back in his bag. After last night Harry had come to the conclusion that the theory behind Occlumency could only help so much but the fact that it was helping was enough incentive for him to keep reading. Besides, what was he supposed to do? Ask Professor Snape for help on theory? *Yeah right.*

"Like he would help," Remus snorted.

Surprisingly Fred and George were among the first Gryffindors to enter and sat down with Harry between them. Ron and Hermione arrived shortly after and sat across from Harry and started engaging in small talk. Soon enough owls started to arrive with issues of the 'Daily Prophet'. Harry was surprised to see an issue dropped in front of Hermione. Since when did she have a subscription?

It didn't take long for Hermione to devour the front page and let out a startled yelp which got the attention of everyone nearby. "I don't believe it!" she exclaimed as she turned the newspaper around so Harry could see the front page. "Azkaban has been attacked! Ten Death Eaters have broken out!"

Harry could only stare at the ten black-and-white photographs (nine wizards and one witch) that covered the front page. There were names underneath each picture along with the reason they had been sent to the prison. Antonin Dolohov had murdered Gideon and Fabian Prewett (members of the Order in the last war). Algernon Rookwood had passed on Ministry secrets to Voldemort. The list went on until Harry reached the one witch that he had been warned about from Sirius. She was Sirius' cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange who had participated in the torturing of Frank and Alice Longbottom into insanity.

"You know, Bella's fate does not surprise me," Sirius drawled. "She always was psycho. It's a miracle I am so normal."

The other four occupants of the room stared at him. From the corner of her mouth Mrs. Potter asked, "Did he just say he was normal?"

"I am afraid so," James answered. "He is in denial-oof!" James glared at Sirius as he shoved away the pillow that just hit him.

If that wasn't enough, the headline really surprised Harry.

**MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN
PUBLIC QUESTIONS FUDGE'S PERSISTANCE
THAT YOU-KNOW-WHO HASN'T RETURNED**

Harry grabbed the newspaper from Hermione and started to read the article with Fred and George leaning closer to catch a glimpse.

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

The Minister of Magic himself confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening but insists that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Name is not behind the breakout. This, of course, was met with a high amount of doubt among those who were present at the announcement.

Remus slapped his forehead and slumped back on the bed shaking his head. "You'd think he would try to cover his losses by starting to act wouldn't you?" he moaned.

"Cornelius Fudge doesn't act, he reacts, and usually badly," Mrs. Potter sniffed disapprovingly. "That's all he's ever done. He has never taken action in his life and apparently never will. How he became Minister is a mystery."

Cornelius Fudge is already under scrutiny for his appointment of Dolores Umbridge, former Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, when it was revealed that she had only been placed to instill Fudge's beliefs into the minds of the students. Many have begun to wonder if Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter have been right all along in their fight to announce You-Know-Who's return in order to prepare the public.

"You're still wondering?" James cried distressed. "Stop wandering and act people!"

"There is no proof that You-Know-Who has returned or was behind the breakout," the Minister said last night. "For all we know Peter Pettigrew is trying to gather his associates to avenge their fallen master."

"Okay," Lily said rubbing her temple. "I do concede the point that apparently Peter has- er- surprised us all- but plan, and accomplish a mass break out of Azkaban? *Peter Pettigrew*? Are you serious?"

"Shush," Remus told Sirius putting his index finger on Sirius' mouth.

"But-"

"Shush, don't even go there. That pun was already old when your Great-grandfather tried to use it," Remus said flatly. Sirius scowled.

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones refused to comment on the Minister's reluctance to consider that You-Know-Who has returned. "We are following every lead we receive," declared Bones. "No possibility is being overlooked at the current time. For the current time, it is recommended to exercise extreme caution with so many dangerous individuals on the loose. If one of the escapees is spotted, do not approach."

Turning the page, Harry noticed that there was an article on Umbridge's sentencing however the news was now bittersweet. Umbridge was nothing when compared to ten Death Eaters who were now free and back with their master. Harry handed back the paper and stole a glance at Neville who was looking rather pale as he read his own newspaper. He couldn't

imagine what Neville was going through at the moment. *At least I know what Voldemort was happy about now.*

"See, Voldemort's happiness had nothing to do with Snape," Lily pointed out triumphantly.

"He's still a git though," James said.

"But a git that is on our side," Lily said wisely. James just shrugged.

"Well, at least someone is starting to realize what an idiot Fudge is," Fred said with a shrug of the shoulders. "All I can say is it's about time and what were you reading on the second page, Harry?"

Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice trying to ignore the curious stares around him.

"Umbridge's sentencing was announced last night," he said casually. He had to admit that with the breakout he was curious to whether Umbridge would actually end up in Azkaban or not. *Fudge may insist that it isn't safe enough for his pet.*

"That would be career suicide and Fudge wouldn't do that," Sirius snorted. "No, he made that quite clear with all this nonsense."

Hermione quickly opened the newspaper and found the article. "Four years?" she asked in amazement. "Er—wow! I glad she's finally penalized for what she did to you, Harry."

By the end of the day rumors had flooded the halls of the convicts escape and current location. Those who had been raised in wizarding families made it their mission to educate those who weren't in how vicious the escapees were. Those who had relatives of victims from the Death Eaters became instant celebrities. It was a welcomed change for Harry but not those who had a constant grouping of students asking what had happened to their families. Many of the now popular students found a way to corner Harry and ask how he managed to stand all of the attention and rude comments. Telling him that after five years he still couldn't stand it wasn't what they wanted to hear.

When Wednesday evening arrived, Harry managed to shock the Council into silence by announcing that members of the staff would be present for the next D.A. meeting. That certainly took everyone's thoughts off the Death Eater breakout. There would be another brief overview for the teachers before starting protection charms. Neville and Hannah volunteered for covering the overview, Justin and Ginny would be covering countering oncoming spells

while Cho and Luna would cover deflecting oncoming spells. If there was still time, Harry would begin on manipulating protection spells to increase their power.

For nearly three hours the Council researched, planned and practiced the areas they would be covering. They all were extremely nervous and wanted to have everything right. The four Heads of Houses would be present on behalf of their students along with Professor Dumbledore and Sirius. If the group was going to be made public there would be a lot of questions that would need to be answered. Would there be an age limit? Would the Council remain? Would the current members of the Council remain?

"And I can predict one question, or more like a sneered comment Snivellus will make," Remus said with a grimace.

It was enough to make anyone's head spin.

The following night Harry had Occlumency once again but this time Sirius wasn't as quick to intervene as he had been before. From the looks Sirius and Professor Snape were giving each other it was easy to assume that something had been said since Monday night. Harry didn't know if it was the 'mother hen' comment Snape made or not but it was clear that Sirius was ready to hex his former classmate at a moment's notice throughout the lesson.

"Oh Harry," Sirius said waving his hand. "I'm always ready to hex Snivellus. Comment or no comment."

"We know," Lily huffed.

"As I've already said, he gives as much as he gets," James defended Sirius.

"But don't you think that maybe just maybe, if you didn't hex him all the time he could be a little less bitter?" she asked.

James studied her and then he looked around and shrugged, "I doubt it."

"But Ja-"

"I hate to say this," Mrs. Potter cut Lily off, "Because it sounds as if I condone your behavior James, which I don't," she gave James a firm look. "But James does have a point. Snape acts like this with everyone. Hundreds of children are bullied in school. It's not nice but it's how things have always been. It's part of being a child. And most of those children who were bullied don't grow up bitter towards everyone, which is how Snape is. He concentrates on Harry but frankly from what I've seen he only

spares his Slytherins. The boys can't be the only reason he is like that but he is childish enough to make it look like they are and take out whatever made him be like that on someone who wasn't even born when you were at school."

"She does have a point," Remus said. "I know you can't expect us to be best friends but many people who hated each other when children are capable of having civilized relationships in adulthood."

"Okay," Lily conceded. "But I still think you should stop."

The lesson hadn't gone as bad as it could have but there had really been no improvement on Harry's part. It wasn't because of a lack of effort. Harry just couldn't manage to push Professor Snape out quick enough once the teacher accessed his memories. The Potions Master did happen to mention that it was impressive for someone like Harry to be able to keep someone out for as long as he did but quickly added that it didn't matter unless the attacker could be kept out at all times.

Typical Snape to counter a complement with an insult.

With Harry's next Occlumency lesson scheduled for Sunday night, he could focus on the D.A. meeting which arrived faster than he expected. He had arrived to the Room of Requirement early with the rest of the Council, all of them looking extremely nervous. They had just finished setting up when students started to arrive with smiles on their faces and talking excitedly to each other. There was no incentive to be quiet any longer with Umbridge gone.

The students took their usual seats on the cushions around the room with the Council standing in the middle and Harry standing off to the side near the door. With a nod from Harry, Cho stepped forward to address the group. "With the current changes Professor Dumbledore has made, our group has been revealed to the teaching staff," Cho said with as much confidence as she could muster. "Tonight the Heads of the Houses, Professor Dumbledore and Professor Black will be observing the meeting. We are not in trouble. They are just curious to the progress that we have made."

"Even Professor Snape?" Ron asked skeptically.

Sirius eagerly pointed at the book giving the others significant looks. The others just rolled their eyes.

"Even Professor Snape," Harry confirmed. "The teachers are here to observe only. The meeting will operate as it normally would. It would be best if you all just ignore their presence. They are not coming to evaluate you individually. They are coming to observe the

D.A. as a group and the benefits of it. With the current state of things I'm sure the idea of students learning how to defend themselves is on the mind of every *current* teacher."

"Yeah, like that will make them calm," James snorted.

"There is no way they won't be self-conscious with all those teachers there," Lily agreed.

"Everyone pair off," Neville said taking over. "We will start with a basic review before starting on different protection charms."

Once everyone paired off, Neville and Hannah began running through what they had already learned. It wasn't too long before Harry heard a knock on the door and opened quietly it to see Sirius smiling at him. He motioned for the Defense teacher to be quiet then stepped aside so everyone could enter. The six adults entered and saw the students currently practicing with Hannah Abbott and Neville Longbottom instructing them.

"They are currently reviewing," Harry said quietly to the staff as he silently asked for six chairs which appeared instantly. "Please take a seat. We will be covering protection charms today. Everyone has been told to carry on as if you weren't here. I hope that's all right."

"That's fine, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "We're not here to intrude, simply observe the learning environment you and the Council have created."

Harry nodded before moving to the back of the room and observed like he normally did. He knew that if he stood anywhere else he would be a distraction since everyone tended to listen to Harry above anyone in the Council. Harry could only assume it was because he had already faced what they were preparing themselves to face. It was something that Harry really didn't like the fact that everyone would ignore the Council if he were to step out of the shadows and focus on him but he really didn't know how to change it.

Once the review was complete, Cho and Luna started with how to deflect spells. Transfiguring object into mirrors, casting spells of equal power at an angle to divert the spell and summoning objects to block the spell were covered. Everyone sat down and took a cushion and tried to transfigure it into a mirror with Harry, Cho and Luna helping those who were having difficulties. This had been something Professor McGonagall had taught Harry before his third year. It wasn't difficult but the wand movements had to be precise. Once everyone had succeeded, everyone lined up into three rows and had to divert spells that Harry, Cho and Luna cast. The spells started off with the levitation spell and ended with the stunning spell.

When everyone had their turn they worked on the Summoning Charm to block spells. The Weasley twins had everyone laughing when Fred summoned George and used him as a shield. That wasn't what Cho and Luna had in mind but it worked.

Justin and Ginny then took over with countering spells. They only covered a few before Dobby popped in with trays of pumpkin juice and water for anyone who was thirsty. Once everyone had had their fill, Harry thanked Dobby before suggesting he ask the observing teachers if they needed anything. Dobby hurried over to Sirius, bouncing happily that 'Harry Potter's dog has come back to Hogwarts'. This caused Professor Snape to nearly spit out his drink while the rest of the teachers chuckled quietly. They had never heard Sirius referred as Harry Potter's dog before.

Sirius crossed his arms and sniffed, "So what?"

You could see the other four jaws quivering as they tried hard not to laugh.

"That isn't funny!"

They lost it and laughter was heard.

"Hey, you're just jealous!"

Returning back to Justin and Ginny, the D.A. worked on countering the stunning spell. After twenty minutes of practice only a few people had managed to counter the spell but it gave everyone something to work on for next week. Glancing at his watch, Harry noticed that it was nearly curfew and motioned as much to Ginny and Justin with a hand signaling system the Council had devised to prevent interruptions. Justin and Ginny nodded and stepped aside as Harry once again stepped out of the shadows.

"Good work tonight, everyone," Harry said as he joined Justin and Ginny. "Remember, just because we are beginning to learn more advanced topics there is no reason to forget the basics. As you have learned tonight the basics can be used in a duel, even the basics can save a life. If you have any questions, you know who to talk to. I recommend you all be off before anyone in our audience decides to hand out detention."

Everyone immediately looked at Professor Snape before they thanked the Council and hurried out before any of the teachers could follow through on Harry's threat. The Council stubbornly stayed by Harry's side although looking slightly uneasy. Harry was glad that they stayed behind. He really didn't want to face the teaching staff alone, especially Professor Snape.

Professor Dumbledore was the first to rise from his seat. "I must say I am amazed with how well the seven of you are in instructing your peers. I can not speak for your Heads of Houses but I see no reason that such a beneficial group should not continue. It appears that the 'hands on' approach is exactly what the upperclassmen need to learn properly, wouldn't you agree, Sirius?"

"You know I do, Headmaster," Sirius said evenly. "That was the reason I brought this group to your attention in the first place."

"I noticed there weren't any Slytherins in the group, Potter," Professor Snape said coolly.

"I hate to be right," Remus sighed.

"Since when?" James asked.

"That is definitely a new development, Prongs. Because last time I checked Moony loved being right and rubbing it on our faces," Sirius said nodding. Remus smacked him on the face with a pillow. Sirius looked shocked and pointed at James. Remus sighed but nodded and promptly threw a pillow on James too.

Harry let out a sigh. "Hermione contacted everyone with the idea of the group, Professor," he said truthfully. "At the time, Umbridge was still a teacher here so participation was limited to individuals who we could trust to remain silent. With the events at the beginning of the year you have to admit that I'm not the person a Slytherin would turn to. Malfoy has the majority of the fifth year Slytherins wrapped around his finger and he has made his opinions of me quite clear. Would you approach those who made it their mission to make your life miserable?"

"He has a point, Severus," Professor Flitwick said as he jumped off his chair. "Don't blame the boy for playing it safe. Miss Granger apparently had that in mind when she sought out participants." The Charms Professor approached the Council with a bright smile on his face.

"They are trying to reason with Snape," Sirius moaned. "Like that will help!"

"You all have my support. It was refreshing to see no barriers between the houses that are involved. I could only hope that you will open the group publicly so more of my Ravenclaws may benefit from such an experience."

Harry suddenly grew nervous. It was one thing to have the staff's support but to allow everyone in the school to join wasn't something Harry was prepared to do. "I don't mean to deny anyone the benefit of learning but I don't think we could have the same results," he said truthfully. "I think it's the personal instruction that is the reason why everyone is responding to the group. We really couldn't do that if the group were to be made public."

"You could if you added more members to your teaching group, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall offered. "Granted, adding new members would halt your progression for a few weeks at most. I think many fifth and seventh year students could benefit from this group for the OWLs and NEWTs."

"Which was the main reason Granger sought us out to begin with," Hannah said softly. "The D.A. isn't our group. Everyone who was here tonight has an equal say in everything. That was one of the reasons Harry suggested representatives from each house. If anyone wants to learn something or has a question on something, they tell their representative and then the Council discusses how to present it at the meetings. We can't make such a decision without talking to the group but do you honestly think those who are not involved will take us seriously?"

Professor Snape rose from his seat. "If you're referring to the Slytherins—"

"Oh Snape, shush," Mrs. Potter admonished. "The world doesn't revolve around Slytherin!"

"—Severus," Professor Dumbledore lightly warned before addressing everyone. "I can see the reasoning for the staff's eagerness and the Council's reluctance to make the D.A. public. Although we would encourage to see all students be allowed this opportunity we must respect the wishes of those who would be most affected by the change. We can not fault them for decisions that were made based on circumstances that they had no control over. It is clear that every member of the D.A. is comfortable in the environment they have gone out of their way to create." Dumbledore turned to the Council. "We will respect your decision at the moment but please keep the option of making the D.A. available to all students in mind. The only matter I wish to change is the lack of a faculty supervisor, especially when you start on the more difficult topics."

"Oh, Moony could supervise," James cried delighted.

"Yes, after all he was the best DADA teacher ever," Lily agreed.

Sirius looked shocked. With his mouth open in silent outrage he waved his hand frantically pointing at the chattering duo that was already making a list of how Remus would be perfect.

Remus cleared his throat, "I think Sirius would be a better option since he is the DADA teacher."

"Yeah," Sirius huffed.

James stared confused, "Oh yeah," he shrugged. "I forgot. Can you blame me? Forgetting Padfoot joined the enemy?"

"Hey!"

"I know," Lily sighed dramatically. "We never want to be reminded of how low our loved ones have sunk."

"Hey!"

"Relax Sirius," Mrs. Potter chuckled. "They were having you on from the start."

Sirius glared at the laughing couple, "How such evil people can have such a sweet kid is beyond me!" he said raising his hands in defeat.

The Council members nodded reluctantly. They were happy that Professor Dumbledore would allow the D.A. to continue but they had mixed feelings about a faculty supervisor. Until now they had the freedom to choose the topics covered. *It's not like we are learning anything we shouldn't be learning. The question is will the supervisor approve of the intensity of the topics?* Harry was aware that there had been some aspects were above the OWL level but no one had complained.

Professor Dumbledore's voice pulled Harry out of his thoughts. "We thank the seven of you for allowing us to observe your group," the Headmaster said pleasantly. "We will be in touch concerning a possible supervisor. Now, I suggest you all head to your houses before the hour grows too late."

Together the Council bid farewell and left the Room of Requirement. The moment the door closed behind them, they all let out a relieved sigh. Being held under the gazes of so many

teachers at one time was certainly unnerving. The six representatives all turned and looked at Harry who could only stare at the closed door. He had known that the meeting hadn't gone the way the staff had obviously wanted but he couldn't help the feeling that giving in would only cause more problems.

"Are you okay Harry?" Cho asked softly.

Harry turned his attention to the six pairs of concerned eyes. "Was it the right thing?" he asked. "Was it right to deny others the chance to improve themselves?"

"Harry, it's not our responsibility to teach everyone how to defend themselves," Ginny said bluntly. "This started out as a group of friends getting together for a group study in magical defense and that's what it still is. Personally, I think you made a very good point. We wouldn't have the same results if the group was made public. The one on one tutoring is what makes the group so successful. You made the right decision."

"Yes, besides, if Dumbledore's previous choices for teachers hadn't been so...er...eclectic, they wouldn't need to have the DA," Remus nodded.

"Umbridge wasn't Dumbledore's fault," Mrs. Potter pointed out.

"She may not have been but from what we gathered the two first DADA teachers were anything but competent," Lily said.

"Yeah, and one had Voldemort sharing his head with him," James shuddered.

"Let's just hope the supervisor isn't Snape," Neville said with a shudder causing everyone to laugh then continue their way to their houses to inform the members of the D.A. what had happened. Some things would never change and Neville's fear of Professor Snape was one of them.

It didn't take the teaching staff long to come up with a suitable supervisor for the Defense Association. To avoid any favoritism, it was decided that an actual teacher should not supervise which resulted in Remus being the best choice for the position.

Sirius glared at Remus. Remus tried his best to remain cool but he was jumping in glee inside.

"Oh, Sirius," Mrs. Potter tried to placate the boy. "The kids were just kidding before but there is a point here. The students will be more relaxed with someone that has no say on their grades."

Sirius shrugged and glared once more at Remus for good measure.

The entire Council was ecstatic since Remus was the very person they were modeling their instruction after. There were many in the D.A. who had already spoken to Remus in private, especially Hermione and the Weasleys so everyone was comfortable with the former teacher's attendance.

"See?" Sirius pouted. "They like Moony better. They even model stuff after him."

"Because when they created the DA they hadn't had you as a teacher yet," Remus said patting Sirius back.

"STILL!" Sirius moaned.

There was no doubt that Remus' calming presence for the students to confide in was exactly what many needed. Students had indeed turned to the former teacher whether it was to vent their frustrations, ask for guidance, or just to talk to someone who would simply listen. Remus had been given an office near the Marauder's Quarters where he met with those who wanted to talk. It was amazing that in just a week any presence of Dolores Umbridge had been nearly erased.

Remus ended up giving the D.A. more freedom than the Council had expected and they were thankful for it. He offered his assistance during the Council meetings and his input when asked during the D.A. meetings but other than that he took up an observatory role. Remus had been insistent in the belief that he didn't want to disrupt the environment the D.A. had already created regardless of how many times members wanted to involve him. All in all the D. A. operated much like it had before Christmas break.

"Perfect Moony," Sirius mumbled.

"Someone is jealous and in need of a nap," Lily said in a sing song voice.

"Am not! I'm not five!"

"Then start acting more maturely. Remus was the best choice even though you are a good teacher," Lily said firmly.

Sirius shrugged. "Okay," he mumbled but then added, "But *I* am Harry's dog. Not Moony."

Remus nodded seriously doing his best not to laugh.

With Quidditch starting again, Harry had barely enough time to finish his homework much less worry about the matters happening beyond the walls of Hogwarts. He had Occlumency two nights a week, D.A. two nights a week, Quidditch two nights a week, leaving one night to finish everything he couldn't finish on the nights he had something going on. It was becoming difficult for Harry to keep up with his Occlumency study without anyone becoming suspicious leaving Harry to study either late at night or early in the morning.

Due to his lack of free time, Harry had to resort to arriving early for Defense class for talks with Sirius and staying behind during the D.A. meetings for a word with Remus. Both of his guardians seemed to be enjoying their new positions immensely. Sirius had made it his mission to ready the students for their end of the year tests providing both theoretical and practical learning that quickly made Defense Against the Dark Arts the most favored class at Hogwarts.

"See," James said. "Still a favorite."

Sirius pout diminished considerably and he even puffed his chest a little.

As January faded into February, the Ministry had followed through with their declaration by sending a representative (Madam Stiles) to observe classes. According to Sirius, the woman had been a younger version of Professor McGonagall in personality and temperament. For the first day the woman had observed first and second year classes taught by Sirius, Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Sprout. She also sat down with Remus to discuss his position. The following day, Madam Stiles observed third year classes taught by Hagrid, Professor Vector, Professor Trelawney, and Professor Sinistra. During the two days she also took time to observe 'student life' by attending meals and strolling the hallways, asking students random questions about their time at Hogwarts. Nothing was really said about her visit once she left and after a few weeks of silence, everyone figured the teaching staff must have passed their evaluations although how Professor Snape managed to pass no one knew.

"He must know his potions since he couldn't have passed based on his nurturing teaching stile," Remus said.

With the arrival of the long awaited Hogsmeade weekend along with wetter and warmer weather, everyone who could was eager to have a day away from the school. It also happened that it was Valentine's Day which turned out to be quite a headache for Harry. Girls he had never noticed before were asking him if he wanted to go to the wizarding village with them forcing Harry to decline as politely as he could. Sirius, Remus and his close friends found Harry's dilemma hilarious which only made Harry more frustrated. In the end, Harry, Ron and Hermione agreed that they would spend their time at Hogsmeade together with Sirius and Remus shadowing them...just in case.

They arrived at Hogsmeade as the stores were opening and quickly fell into the normal best friend banter that had been absent for so long. Ron and Hermione would bicker about some unimportant topic, Harry would break them up before suggesting another topic and soon enough they were arguing about that. Normally Harry would find the constant arguing annoying but today it was the distraction he needed. It was also hilarious to hear some of the defenses Ron came up with when Hermione had the argument all but won.

Needing a break, the three teenagers with the two adults following them ventured into Three Broomsticks. After finding a table and purchasing drinks in the busy pub, Ron and Harry started talking about their upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff with Sirius while Hermione and Remus engaged in a quiet discussion about the upcoming OWLs. It was only February and Hermione was already starting to panic about not being prepared.

"I think Hermione must be related to Moony somehow," James said.

"James!" Mrs. Potter scolded. "Remus isn't that bad!"

"Yes, he is," Sirius chuckled and then launched himself at Remus. "But we love our bookworm."

"I am not a bookworm. Only because unlike you and James I happen to be literate does not make me a bookworm."

"Oohhh, big words," Sirius said and Remus banged a pillow on his forehead.

Out of nowhere a bright flash filled the pub temporarily blinding everyone at and around Harry's table causing Sirius to protectively grab Harry and push him underneath the table. People shouted in complaint at what could only be a wizarding camera taking a picture in the middle of a crowded pub. Furiously blinking, Harry's vision slowly returned to normal allowing him to pull himself out from underneath the table as a familiar voice filled his ears.

"Harry Potter!" exclaimed an exited Rita Skeeter who already had her quill and parchment in hand.

Moans were heard.

She was wearing bright yellow robes that certainly made her stand out in the crowd. Her photographer was already raising his camera for another picture. "Fancy meeting you here, with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin no less!"

Remus quickly grabbed the camera from the photographer as Sirius rested a protective hand on Harry's shoulder. The photographer tried to take his camera back but a fierce growl from Remus halted his attempts. "We have nothing to say to you, Rita," Sirius said tensely, "and don't you dare attempt to play dumb. The entire village is aware that this is a student weekend. No one stalks my godson so leave."

"Yeah, be smart. Leave!" Lily said firmly.

There was a tense silence before Rita regained her bearings and tried another approach. "Now, now, Mr. Black," she said sweetly. "The public has a right to know how the-boy-who-lived is coping with the latest events. The Minister of Magic is currently facing an inquiry from the Wizengamot and may be possibly voted out of office. Mr. Potter was the first to stand against the Ministry. Is a few moments of your time really too much to ask?"

"Hum, yes," James said in a voice that cleared stated he thought Skeeter was an annoyance.

Harry's eyes widened at the statement. Why would anyone think he would have anything to say about Fudge? *Because you're a bloody celebrity that everyone follows like a flock of birds.* It was sad that people would listen to what a fifteen-year-old had to say about something he had no knowledge about when they wouldn't listen to Professor Dumbledore concerning Voldemort's return.

"When it interferes with his personal freedoms?" Remus countered as he opened the back of the camera, exposing the film to the light. "Yes, it is too much to ask. We have nothing to say to you, Rita, and we will not allow your nosy photographer to steal pictures of him." He tossed the camera back to the outraged photographer as he glanced at Sirius and shifted his gaze to the door. Sirius nodded and moved behind Harry and Ron while Remus rested a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we'll be on our way."

"GO MOONY!" Sirius cried. "You tell her!"

Harry let Sirius usher him out of the pub trying to ignore all the stares he was receiving. Some were looking at him with pity in their eyes, others were awestruck and others were just curious. Harry didn't know which looks he hated more. *Definitely the looks of pity.* By the time they stepped out on the street Harry wanted nothing more than to hide, especially when the reason they left followed them out.

"Mr. Black," Rita said as she moved in front of Harry and Ron, blocking their path. "Now I'm sure we can work something out." She smiled softly at him, a smile that Harry had never seen on her face before. "Perhaps if Mr. Potter isn't available to comment you could in his place. The public would *love* to hear what the infamous Sirius Black has to say about the man who worked so hard to keep you away from your godson. This could be your chance to set the record straight."

"As tempting as that would be I have to decline," Sirius said firmly. "Perhaps when you stop prying into people's personal lives they'll be more willing to comment."

"He, he," Mrs. Potter chuckled. "I bet she loved that."

Rita's smile stayed on her face as she stepped closer, forcing Harry and Ron to step aside. It was clear that Sirius was trying extremely hard to keep his temper in check as Rita rested a hand on Sirius' chest. "I'll take that under advisement, Mr. Black," she said softly. "Just remember that the offer for a private interview is always open."

All five of them had disgusted looks on their faces and Sirius started gagging.

"Oh God! Help! I need a disinfecting bath!" he cried hysterically brushing his chest as if to clean it. Remus and James were at his side rubbing his back in an instant.

Harry's eyebrows shot up as his jaw dropped. He couldn't believe it! Rita Skeeter—the life ruining reporter for the Daily Prophet was flirting with Sirius? Rita Skeeter! Harry thought he was going to be sick. When he had mentioned to Sirius about finding a girlfriend this wasn't what he had in mind. Ron and Hermione looked equally shocked at the bold approach Rita was taking while Remus looked like he was trying hard to stop himself from laughing.

"Moony! Don't laugh at my disgrace!"

"Sorry Padfoot."

Sirius pushed away Rita's hand as his temper finally got the better of him. "I wouldn't go anywhere private with you, Rita," he said through his teeth. "You have done nothing but write of how Remus and I are nothing more than an ex-convict and a werewolf for the past few years."

"Yeah, you disgusting woman! Don't touch me again!"

Rita stared at Sirius in disbelief. "Mr. Black, I'm a reporter," she said pompously. "It is my job to report on current events. You *are* an ex-convict and Mr. Lupin *is* a werewolf. Anyone would question what child should be raised in that sort of environment."

Sirius moved over to Harry, never taking his eyes off of Rita. "You may be a reporter but I'm a man looking out for my adoptive son," he said leaving no room for argument. "One has to wonder what sort of paper the 'Daily Prophet' is to ignore a person's right to privacy by publishing your writing on Harry's personal life. A word to the wise, Miss Skeeter, I'm not afraid of the Ministry and I'm certainly not afraid of you or your paper. Leave Harry alone or you'll find yourself at the receiving end of a lawsuit. Harry is underage and therefore allowed the right to privacy."

"HAH! I am afraid of no one!" Sirius cried.

"Really," Mrs. Potter raised an eyebrow.

"Except you Mrs. P," Sirius said properly cowed.

"But he's the-boy-who-lived!" Rita protested. "With the title comes obligations to the public!"

Harry froze at the comment, his body tensing. It was too similar to something Umbridge had told him during detention. Why did everyone believe that he owed them for a title that he never wanted, especially considering the fact that they didn't believe what had happened last June? *Wait a minute!* No one had other than the Order had actually heard about what happened after the third task. Could it work? Could he use his 'celebrity status' to help the Order?

"I believe you have that backwards," Remus said firmly. "I believe the public has an obligation to Harry."

"He, he," Lily laughed. "Go Moony!"

"What is your paper's position concerning Fudge?" Harry asked curiously.

"Hum, Harry, what are you doing?" James asked worried.

Everyone stared at Harry in surprise. "Er—well...it all depends on the results of the inquiry, Mr. Potter," Rita said carefully. "Why?"

Harry just shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I was just thinking that I could offer you the story of a lifetime," he said casually which instantly peaked Rita's interests. "The actual events that happened after Cedric and I disappeared from the maze." He felt Sirius' grip on his shoulder tighten slightly. "I could tell you how Cedric actually died, Voldemort's rebirth and names of the Death Eaters who were present but if your paper is too afraid of the Minister and his desperate attempt to hide the truth from the public then I really can't help you."

"Harry," Sirius warned softly as he tightened his grip on Harry's shoulder. "What are you doing? Didn't you see what she just did to me?"

"Yes, didn't you!" Sirius cried hysterically brushing his chest again.

Harry looked over his shoulder at his godfather. "I'm using it to our advantage," he said softly.

Rita Skeeter looked like she was mentally fighting with herself on what to do. This was the story that could make or break her career. With the current events people were bound to believe anything Harry had to say but if his story confirmed Dumbledore's, the 'Daily Prophet' would be in a world of trouble if Fudge wasn't removed from office. A smile slowly formed on her face but it wasn't the smile she had given Sirius. It was the smile that usually meant that she was up to something.

"There is a catch though," Harry said quickly. "You have to print the complete truth. You can't twist my words or spin the story any way you feel like it. Also, Sirius and Remus must proofread the story before it's published. Any fabrication and you will find yourself out of a job and the 'Daily Prophet' will be hit with so many lawsuits that they will never be able to publish a paper again. If you don't feel that the 'Daily Prophet' will publish *the truth*, I know someone who has connections to 'The Quibbler'."

"Oh good," Lily sighed relieved. "He has a plan. I was worried there for a minute."

"We all were," Mrs. Potter agreed.

Rita Skeeter scowled, clearly not liking Harry's restrictions but her curiosity was too peeked to ignore. "Fine," she said in annoyance. "I agree to your terms. When and where?"

Harry looked over his shoulder at Sirius who couldn't keep a grin off his face. "I think I know just the place," he said then glanced at Ron and Hermione. "This may take a while so perhaps you two should head back to the castle."

Ron and Hermione instantly shook their heads. "We don't care how long it takes, Professor," Hermione insisted. "We want to support Harry. Plus, wouldn't it help to have a few more witnesses just in case? I mean—no offense—but I really don't trust her."

"Smart girl," Remus nodded,

"I don't either," Remus muttered, clearly not as supporting of the idea of Harry revealing what happened to Rita Skeeter.

"Smart man," Remus said.

"Moony, you can't call yourself smart!" Sirius said.

"Says who?" Remus asked.

Sirius silenced Remus with a look before leading everyone to the Shrieking Shack. Rita was extremely uncomfortable with being in a place that was supposedly haunted but managed to pull herself together long enough to take out her quick notes quill and being the interview with Remus standing over her shoulder, watching the quill. With Ron and Hermione beside him and Sirius behind him, Harry retold what happened at the graveyard, neglecting certain details that he knew Sirius and Remus didn't want revealed.

Voldemort's discovery of the suppression necklace and the outbursts weren't important to the tale. Harry explained how Cedric died and Voldemort's rebirth. He revealed that he and Voldemort dueled and he managed to escape when Voldemort had faltered. He also named the Death Eaters who had been mentioned by Voldemort, something that Rita was shocked to hear. Many of the people who financially backed the Minister were among the group.

When the interview was finally over, Rita informed Sirius and Remus that she would provide them with a draft of the article in two days time before leaving. Looking at his friends and guardians, Harry couldn't help feeling relieved to see proud smiles on their faces. He knew there were no guarantees that it would even be printed but at the moment he had done all he

could. Now all he could do was hope that he had done the right thing although in his heart he felt that he had. With even more Death Eaters roaming free, people needed to protect themselves. Hiding was no longer an option.

"That interview sure will be a bomb!" Mrs. Potter said pleased.

"One that will explode right on a certain annoying blond Slytherin's face," James said gleefully

--

A/N- Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Not mine.

Chapter 22

Facing the Public

Harry, Ron and Hermione hadn't said a word about the interview from the moment they stepped on Hogwarts soil. Sirius and Remus had insisted that the matter be kept quiet since they had no idea whether Rita Skeeter would keep her word or not. No one other than the five who had been present for the interview knew anything about it. Harry didn't know if it was smart keeping something like this from Professor Dumbledore but he trusted Sirius and Remus enough not to question the decision.

"AHHHHHHHH!"

"Lily, are you feeling well?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"AHHHHHHHH!" Lily kept screaming. James shook her and she finally stopped.

"Care to explain?" he asked.

"The world as we know it is ending!" she cried.

"What?" Remus asked bewildered.

"Sirius' decisions are not being questioned," she squeaked.

"AHHHHHHHH!" the one adult and other two teenagers joined her.

"Honestly," Sirius sniffed disdainfully. "No trust in me whatsoever."

"AHHHHHHHH!"

Surprisingly Rita had kept her word by sending a copy of the article to Sirius on Tuesday along with a letter from the editor of the 'Daily Prophet' asking for verification of the authenticity of the story.

Remus wagged his eyebrows at Sirius.

"What?"

"Rita sent the article to you," Remus said.

"Ohhh," James cooed.

"Argh, ahhhhhhh! Help!" Sirius gagged and ran around the room in circles hysterically.

Still feeling uneasy about the situation, Remus took the liberty of visiting the editor personally to deliver the article with a few minor changes Sirius and Remus had made so Harry wasn't portrayed as the defenseless child that Rita Skeeter tried to make him out to be.

Harry really didn't have time to think about what Sirius and Remus were doing with the Quidditch game against Hufflepuff taking place on Saturday. Angelina had insisted on practice every night which left Harry with quite the predicament with Occlumency lessons. Professor Snape hadn't been pleased in the slightest to hear that Harry needed to postpone Occlumency for Quidditch, claiming that Harry wasn't taking the lessons seriously. Harry could only let the man rant. He had thought he was improving since he hadn't really had any scar headaches since the Azkaban breakout and the dreams of the Departments of Mysteries had stopped. He still had a problem pushing Snape out of his mind once his defenses failed but he was improving.

Remus had taken over teaching the Council members the material they would need for the Saturday meeting in Harry's absence. Harry had to admit that he felt like he was letting everyone down. Even with Remus' presence, Harry still felt like the supervisor of the Council and therefore it was his responsibility. Yes, Quidditch was also a responsibility but he couldn't deny the feeling that the D.A. and Occlumency should be more important than a game.

"Harry," James said shocked. "Don't say that! The Quidditch gods may hear you and punish you!"

"Quidditch gods?" Lily asked raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," James said desperately and the others had to roll their eyes at him.

It hadn't been the first time Harry doubted his placement on the Quidditch team. He loved playing Quidditch. It offered a sort of release that nothing else could match. All of his worries seemed to fall so far away in the air only to return full force the moment he landed. Harry had to admit that out of all of his responsibilities, Quidditch seemed to be the last on his mind making him wonder if he was doing the team justice. Everyone else was so dedicated while he was trying to find a feasible way to split his time wisely.

"That's not true. You don't know their schedules. Ron's a prefect and has his OWLs, Angelina, Alicia and the twins have their NEWTs and they are all in the DA. I bet they are swamped too!" Remus reasoned.

"Harry never thinks what he is doing may be normal," Sirius pointed out and Remus scribbled again on his trusty list.

The 'Daily Prophet's' decision was revealed Friday morning when an overabundance of owls entered the Great Hall while everyone was eating. Harry was desperately trying to finish the schoolwork he hadn't completed the night before so he wasn't aware of what was happening until several people nearby suddenly spit out their pumpkin juice. Looking up, Harry saw Hermione unrolling her own issue of the paper with a grin on her face. She turned the paper around to reveal the headline:

**DAILY PROPHET EXCLUSIVE!
HARRY POTTER REVEALS THE TRUTH!
YOU-KNOW-WHO HAS RETURNED
AND MINISTER FUDGE KNEW!**

Harry grabbed the paper from Hermione had quickly scanned through the article to make sure everything was like he had told Rita. Several gasps echoed through the hall followed by the abrupt ceasing of conversation seemed as everyone crowded around those who had an issue. Line by line Harry looked over the article trying to find any sign that Rita hadn't kept her word. She had though. There was no fabrication whatsoever. *Everything* had been written exactly as he had told including the names of the Death Eaters present.

"I think someone won't like that!" Sirius said in a singsong voice.

"You think?" Mrs. Potter asked sarcastically.

Handing back the paper, Harry returned to his school work as whispers started to breakout throughout the Great Hall. He didn't dare over at the Slytherin table or up at the Head Table. He knew what the reactions would be. Professor Snape was going to be furious, Professor Dumbledore would simply look at him with a smile and those twinkling eyes, Professor McGonagall would be pleased by keep it to herself since she didn't want to appear biased, Sirius and Remus had already made their opinions clear, and the remainder of the teachers would follow Professor Dumbledore.

"This is wonderful Harry!" Hermione said excitedly. "Not only was the truth printed but the 'Daily Prophet' is behind you!"

Harry looked up at Hermione in surprise. Where had she gotten that idea? "What are you talking about?" he asked. "They printed the article but that doesn't mean they—"

"—you didn't read the editor's note, did you?" Hermione interrupted then looked back down at the paper. "This story has been confirmed accurate by outside sources. The 'Daily Prophet' stands by Harry Potter and apologizes for any ill reports that had been published regarding Headmaster Albus Dumbledore in the previous months. Due to recent events the 'Daily Prophet' has come to believe the Minister of Magic has not had the concerns of the wizarding world in mind and will work to report the entire truth to the public."

"Translation; the Daily Prophet noticed Fudge is going down and is trying to do some serious ass kissing so they don't look bad," Mrs. Potter snorted

James looked shocked, "Mum! You said ass!"

"So."

"Mum! You're a mum. Mums don't say things like that!"

The other three teenagers were nodding vigorously.

Mrs. Potter leaned forward and looked straight at James, "I'm going to tell you a secret James. Mums are human beings too."

James started sobbing and Sirius went hysterical, "Take that back Mrs. P! Take that back!"

Mrs. Potter couldn't help but laugh.

Harry could only blink as his mind tried to grasp what Hermione had just read to him. The 'Daily Prophet' actually turned against Fudge? He had never thought that would happen. "Well, that's a surprise," he said evenly. "I guess we can only hope that Fudge is voted out of office now."

"Er—don't look now but there are quite a few Slytherins who look ready to hex you, Harry," Ron warned. "Maybe we should leave before something happens."

"And make myself an even bigger target?" Harry countered. "Remember the times when Malfoy's cornered me? I was alone. He will only approach me when he can overpower me, whether he needs his minions to do it for him or not."

"Showing the coward he is," Lily sniffed disdainfully.

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other before shifting their gaze back to Harry. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it," Hermione said carefully. "You have to admit that Malfoy's been really quiet lately...well, ever since the Quidditch match. Maybe he finally learned his lesson."

Sirius burst out laughing, "Oh Hermione. You're a riot!"

Harry and Ron snorted at the comment. That certainly wasn't going to happen any time soon. It was true that Malfoy hadn't been causing as much ruckus as he normally would but hadn't exactly been a model student either. He didn't hesitate to take advantage of every opportunity he had to jinx an unsuspecting Gryffindor but managed to do so in a discrete manner that no one could actually prove he had indeed cast the spell except for checking his wand which Malfoy would never willingly give up.

"At least we don't have Potions today," Ron said gratefully. "Can you imagine how bad Snape would be?"

Harry had to wince at the comment. He hadn't thought of that. Professor Snape had a role to play, Harry accepted that. The problem was that Snape's hatred for the Potter family only made that role more convincing. There had been what could only be described as a silent agreement between them ever since Harry had been removed from the care of his relatives.

Professor Snape accepted Harry's life hadn't been a walk in the park and Harry accepted that Snape would always be Snape. It was that understanding that allowed Harry to keep a level head during Occlumency lessons.

"I think *will* be is more like it," Harry said truthfully. "This isn't going to go away after one day. Remember last year when my name was in the paper all the time? The only difference is this time I'm guilty of what he usually accuses me of: using my fame for my own gain." Ron and Hermione moved to object. "I'm not going to deny it. Rita wanted a story and I took advantage of the situation to get the word out."

With the time for classes drawing near, students started leaving allowing Harry, Ron and Hermione to somewhat blend in the crowd. Students from Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw couldn't hide their amazement and their sympathy. The article had been rather blunt in the horrors that Harry had faced that night. Students now knew what Cedric had faced before he died leaving the Hufflepuff house feeling extremely proud. Students in the Slytherin house seemed to be torn. There were quite a few clearly outraged since their parents had been mentioned in the article but there others especially in the younger years who seemed to not know which way to turn.

"Of course there are," Mrs. Potter said. "Slytherins aren't all bad."

"Yeah, but that is the general consensus," Remus pointed out grimly.

The day passed agonizingly slowly for Harry who tried to avoid Slytherins and the entire staff. It seemed that everywhere Harry turned there was a teacher who had tried to get his attention which could only mean one thing and his guardians confirmed it when they caught up with him just before dinner. Professor Dumbledore wanted to speak to him. Harry didn't even know why he was so reluctant to talk to the Headmaster. Probably because he knew what was going to be said.

"Harry, my boy, although I'm appreciative for what you've done I must insist that you refrain from any more interviews without speaking to me first. It is not your responsibility to be the spokesperson for the Order. I believe we already discussed that it is up for the Order to protect you, not the other way around."

After muttering the password Sirius had given him, Harry walked up to Professor Dumbledore's office and knocked on the door which opened a moment later to reveal a smiling Dumbledore. The Headmaster moved aside and motioned for Harry to enter. With

Quidditch practice starting soon, Harry figured he didn't have time to waste and took his usual spot in front of Professor Dumbledore's desk.

"You have been avoiding me, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly

"Noooooooo," Sirius said sarcastically. "You noticed?"

as he closed the door then moved to his desk and sat down. "I was hoping you could tell me why."

Harry stared at Dumbledore with a raised eyebrow. That was an abnormally blunt statement especially from the Headmaster who lived to talk in riddles. "I wasn't aware you wanted to see me until just a few moments ago," he said honestly. "I'm sure you're aware of how busy I've been lately, sir. "

Professor Dumbledore's smile faltered a bit. "Yes, Professor Snape mentioned something about you being stretched too thin," he said in a concerned tone. "He also mentioned his doubts on whether you had your priorities straight." Harry moved to protest. "Relax, my dear boy. I understand there are commitments you have made before Occlumency lessons began. I believe Professor Snape is still a little sore over the topic of Quidditch. The Slytherin team has been having difficulties with their two replacements."

"Next time teach your students to be better behaved, Snivellus," Sirius snorted.

"Snape isn't there Sirius," Lily pointed out.

"Because if he was he would have heard me?" Sirius asked raising his eyebrow and Lily huffed.

Sitting back in his chair, Professor Dumbledore looked at Harry for a moment before letting out a sigh. "I spoke with your guardians," he said at last. "They explained everything in regards to the article, Harry. However, I must advise you from taking such actions in the future without speaking to an adult first. If I understand everything correctly, Remus had spent quite a bit of time at the 'Daily Prophet' to ensure Rita didn't break her promise."

"Oi, don't use me to guilt trip Harry!" Remus cried.

Harry nodded, his gaze falling to the floor. He had only heard about one visit Remus had made to the editor's office but the revelation didn't surprise him. Remus had been reluctant to entrust Rita Skeeter with such an article from the start. "Yes, sir," Harry said softly. What else was there really to say?

"This is not a reprimand, Harry," Professor Dumbledore

"Sure sounded like one," James huffed crossing his arms and scowling.

said gently and waited for Harry to look up. "I can't tell you how proud I am of you. I know talking about what happened with Rita Skeeter couldn't have been easy. Remus and Sirius mentioned that they had discussed the importance of keeping your outbursts a secret with you. I understand that the outbursts have declined significantly but we still need to be cautious. I trust Occlumency has been working for you?"

Harry nodded. "My scar still hurts from time to time but nothing like it had been," he said.

"It's almost like Voldemort has just forgotten about me for some reason."

"Yeah, I don't like that," Remus grimaced.

"Me neither," Mrs. Potter agreed. "It's just too good to be true."

Dumbledore appeared to frown at the comment. "I doubt that is the case, Harry," he said.

"From what my sources tell me Voldemort is more obsessed with you ever since you managed to override his possession of Nagini. It is possible he may be aware of what your guardians had told you over the holidays. For now, just be cautious, Harry. If you see or feel anything that could come from Voldemort, please let us know." When Harry nodded again Professor Dumbledore smiled. "Very well then, off you go."

"Excuse me!" James said astonished. "How can he just say that and smile. Oh, Voldemort knows your secret and wants to off you more then ever, off to bed!"

"Well, it's not like he had more information to offer," Sirius said.

"A little comfort wouldn't hurt," James whined.

"Don't worry. Padfoot and Moony give him enough comfort," Lily said rubbing James' back.

Harry bid farewell and hurried to dinner. He couldn't help but feel confused to why Professor Dumbledore had been so insistent to talk to him. Did the man really believe that Harry would start giving interviews now? No! It had been a spur of the moment decision to help get the word out, nothing more. Entering the Great Hall, Harry couldn't help but think that the entire conversation had been a fishing expedition on Professor Dumbledore's part. It made Harry wonder if Sirius and Remus were telling Dumbledore anything anymore. He knew his guardians didn't completely trust Dumbledore with everything that had happened. That was the entire reason they both were here. They didn't trust Dumbledore to keep their charge safe.

"Yeah, well," Sirius nodded with a scowl. "He doesn't exactly have a great track record."

The following morning Harry pulled himself out of bed early along with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. They needed a win today to stay in the lead for the Quidditch cup. Since Slytherin had lost two players they weren't considered to be much of a threat. It was strange for Slytherin not to be among the contenders since they had been for so long. Instead, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw were the teams to beat. Hufflepuff had a new Seeker, a third year student that no one really knew anything about but everyone admitted that he was no Cedric Diggory. *No one could be.*

Before Harry knew it he was in the locker room changing into his Quidditch robes. He was really starting to feel the strain of his extra curricular activities and quickly concentrated on clearing his mind of all excess thoughts. Hopefully he would catch the Snitch as soon as possible so he could have time to prepare for the D.A. meeting tonight before tackling his schoolwork along with his Occlumency. *Clear your mind! Don't think about that now!*

"Yes Harry. Now you have to have only one thought in mind. The snitch! The snitch is all there is. Nothing else matters repeat after me--"

"Hum, James! I think Harry has it covered," Remus said patting James' hand.

Stepping onto the field, Harry was nearly blown back by the roar of the crowd in the cool late February morning breeze. He looked out at the faceless bodies that were eagerly waiting for the game to begin. His last match seemed like a lifetime ago. Mounting his broom, Harry waited for the whistle to sound then took off, immediately searching for the Snitch. It was only a matter of minutes before the Hufflepuff Seeker joined him. The boy was rather small

for a third year with brown hair that surrounded his face and hid his eyes. Harry nodded politely to the boy before returning to his task.

It didn't take long before Bludgers came from the left and the right forcing Harry to dive sharply while the Hufflepuff Seeker pulled upwards, one Bludger following each of them. Avoiding the Gryffindor Chasers who were flying by, Harry was saved by Fred who hit the Bludger to George allowing him to pull back up and settle by the Hufflepuff goal. He caught a glance at the score and saw that it was already fifty to ten in favor of Gryffindor. *Hopefully Ron's not taking missing the one goal too hard.*

Scanning the air and field, Harry tried to locate any sign of the golden Snitch. He noticed that the Hufflepuff Seeker mimicked him by moving over to the Gryffindor goal posts. It wasn't long until he was once again in the path of an oncoming Bludger forcing him pull to the right and take off towards the twins. As he was about to dive Harry was a flash of gold and quickly changed direction and take off as fast as he could. It was now in front of the Slytherin stands. Reaching out, Harry nearly grabbed the Snitch when it flew upwards forcing Harry to follow. He was aware of the Bludger behind him, gaining on him. Pushing his Firebolt to its limit, Harry tried to reach the Snitch and put as much distance between himself and the Bludger as possible.

The Snitch veered to the left and Harry followed along with the Bludger. Becoming frustrated with the persistent ball, Harry decided to take a chance. He brought his legs up so that he was basically in a crouched position on his broom. Once his balance was secured, Harry abruptly slowed down before jumping upwards, flipping in a tucked position and the Bludger flew by underneath him.

Silence rang throughout the crowd as Harry landed on his broom and once again took off for the Snitch. The Hufflepuff Seeker had taken advantage of Harry's stunt and was now gaining on the Snitch. In no time Harry had caught up with the opposing Seeker as the Snitch dived. Both Seekers dived, Harry more sharply giving him the edge. His advantage quickly grew. The Hufflepuff's Cleansweep was no match against a Firebolt.

"Mum, I want a Firebolt!" James begged.

"Good thing you're sitting down then," Mrs. Potter said flatly.

"What?" Lily asked.

"So he won't get tired while waiting forever," Sirius explained.

Time seemed to still as Harry sped towards the ground, the roar of the air silencing any noise the crowd could be making. He was in his element now, acting on instinct that he had never been able to explain. That was what flying had been for him. Something so natural and freeing that he rarely felt anymore. Fifty feet until he hit the ground...thirty feet...twenty feet...ten...

With his outstretched hand Harry wrapped his fingers around the Snitch as he quickly pulled his Firebolt upwards, barely avoiding the ground. He soared upwards holding the Snitch up for everyone to see. Cheers erupted as the whistle blew, ending the game. Gryffindor had won 240 to 20. Harry couldn't help but smile as he was nearly tackled by the Weasley twins the moment his feet touched the ground. The rest of the team joined the twins a moment later, all congratulating Harry on a spectacular catch. Gryffindors rushed on to the field to congratulate the team. Gryffindor was in first place for the Quidditch Cup.

For a moment, it was great to feel like an ordinary teenager again.

"James," Lily waved a hand in front of James dreamy face. "Are you okay?"

"Why can't we have a seeker like that?" he asked sighing.

"Because he hasn't been born yet," Remus offered.

James scowled at him and turned to Lily, "Lily. Sorry about the abruptness but I think we need to get to business. I need Harry on the team."

"You do realize," Mrs. Potter said slowly before Lily could get out of her outraged shocked state and bite James' head off, "That even if Lily got pregnant now Harry wouldn't play in the same team as you seeing as how he would be a baby."

"Oh bugger," James groaned.

While the Gryffindor's celebrated in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry feverishly worked on preparing for the D.A. meeting with Remus. They were starting the offensive side of dueling which was bound to be dangerous if the proper precautions weren't taken. Of course danger was a given when the Weasley twins were in the room. It didn't take Harry long to grasp the

material since he would simply be a supervisor tonight along with Remus. It wasn't incredibly difficult but the spells that would be taught needed a lot of concentration in order to perform them correctly. That was where Harry and Remus would be, helping everyone with their focus.

Harry managed to finish a few of his assignments and run through his Occlumency notes before dinner with Sirius' help then met up with Remus and the Council in the Room of Requirement for a final preparation before the meeting. Dueling dummies were aligned against the walls for everyone to practice on. Until everyone learned how to control the spells they would be learning it was too dangerous to place student against student.

The D.A. meeting had certainly been a stressful and frustrating one. No one had anticipated such a touchy topic being taught on the evening of a Quidditch game. The majority of the Gryffindors were still ecstatic over their win while the Hufflepuffs were a tad depressed over their loss. The Ravenclaws were the only ones non-pulsed by the day's events and it showed in their work. Early in the meeting the students had been split into two groups: the Ravenclaws, Hermione and Susan Bones from Hufflepuff in one group with everyone else in the other.

Harry, Remus and Cho took the more advanced group while the rest of the Council split up the other group and worked through the material at a slower pace. Once students grasped everything they were excused allowing the Council to help those who were still having trouble. They finally had to dismiss the remaining students near curfew with the Council members following them shortly. Harry and Remus finished cleaning up then also left, feeling the affects of the extremely long day.

Walking to the Gryffindor Tower in a daze, Harry walked beside Remus until a strange sensation caused him to stop in his tracks. He turned around as he was suddenly filled with feelings of fear and despair.

Remus was about to say something but Sirius put a hand on his arm and shook his head.

"But- feelings-" Remus mouthed.

"No," Sirius mouthed back.

During the whole exchange James had been glaring at both of them with narrowed eyes and his little mantra of "Not an empath, not an empath," going through his head.

Walking to the nearest window, Harry looked out at the forest. He couldn't explain it but he felt an odd pull, almost like he needed to go there. *Something's wrong. Something's very wrong.*

"Harry?" Remus asked softly. "Harry, what is it?"

Harry slowly looked over his shoulder, his face completely blank. The absence of emotion was so eerie, so unlike Harry. It was almost like he was being controlled by someone or something. "She's worried," he said evenly. "There is danger in the forest. I must go. Help is needed. He's dying."

"Who's worried? Who is dying? We need this information?" Mrs. Potter said nervously.

"How the hell does he know that?" Lily shrieked.

Remus grabbed Harry's arm to prevent him from leaving. "Harry, what's going on?" he asked instantly. "Please talk to me. Who's she? Who's dying?"

Harry pulled his arm free and took off to the staircases with Remus following him. The staircases were ready and waiting allowing Harry to descend to the main level in no time. Harry continued running through the Entrance Hall, down the stairs and through the courtyard to the forest. Remus could barely keep up. They ran past Hagrid's cabin and into the forest. Harry appeared to be moving from memory, ducking to avoid branches and jumping over objects that lay in his path. For nearly ten minutes they ran until Harry stopped and dropped to his knees. It was so abrupt that Remus nearly ran into Harry as he skidded to a halt.

Remus could hardly hold back the horror at the sight in front of him. On the ground in front of Harry was a badly beaten Centaur who was gasping for breath. This Centaur was young with white-blond hair and a palomino body that was stained with blood. Cuts were bleeding freely alerting Remus that the attack had been recent. It wasn't hard to determine where such a beating could come from. Centaurs rarely involved themselves in affairs that didn't concern them.

"You mean the other Centaurs did that?" Lily asked horrified.

"Probably," Mrs. Potter said.

"Especially if they think one Centaur decided to lower themselves by serving humans and sharing their knowledge with humans," Remus explained grimly.

Harry gently reached out and touched the Centaur's face. The creature's eyes opened to reveal astonishing and pain-filled blue eyes. "Harry Potter," the Centaur said weakly. "You—you must leave. It isn't...safe for you...Mars is bright...especially in the...forest tonight..."

Remus grasped Harry's shoulder. "Harry, we need to get help," he said urgently. "Come. We can tell Hagrid on our way—"

"I will not leave him," Harry said firmly, not taking his eyes off of the Centaur. "Go. I will be fine, I promise." Remus moved to protest. "Do not worry about your cub, Remus Lupin. He is not alone. He will be protected but you must hurry."

"SOMEONE POSSESSED MY SON!" James yelled.

"UN-POSSES HIM!" Lily yelled.

"I don't think that's a word," Remus said.

"Shush Moony, they've gone batty," Sirius whispered.

Remus stared at Harry in shock for a moment before leaving as fast as his feet could carry him.

"MOONY YOU LEFT HIM!" James cried.

"I went for help!" Remus tried to defend himself.

With the man gone, Harry returned his full attention to the Centaur. "Firenze, you shall not die tonight. You are a noble being in my forest. I will protect you, like I always have."

Firenze stared at Harry with wide eyes. "You have chosen," he gasped.

Harry nodded as he moved his hands so they were hovering above Firenze's injured upper body. "I have," he said.

"What? What did he chose?" Mrs. Potter asked worried.

"Close your eyes, my friend. I am afraid this will hurt. I apologize but it must be done."

Firenze obeyed as Harry also closed his eyes. The faint breeze started to pick up as a rush of power filled Harry causing him to gasp. His entire body felt like it was on fire as his hands started to shake. He could hear Firenze whimpering, knowing that the Centaur was trying to hold back his screams. Finally it became too much and Firenze started screaming painfully. It only lasted a moment then it was over.

Dropping his arms to his sides, Harry opened his eyes to see Firenze's wounds were nearly completely healed. He suddenly felt extremely exhausted and empty. Breathing heavily, Harry tried to stand but couldn't bring himself to move. His legs wouldn't work and his arms were just too heavy. No, movement was definitely out of the question. That much was clear. Harry sat back on his heels as he fought to stay conscious.

He lost the battle quickly.

"Oh my," Mrs. Potter whispered putting her hand on her mouth.

"What?" James asked.

"He's a natural healer," she whispered.

"Is that bad?" Lily asked.

"No," James said relieved. "At least I don't think so."

Sunlight was Harry's wake-up call. Opening his eyes, Harry was confused to find himself in the overly bright hospital wing. His head was throbbing but it wasn't because of his scar. *Thank Merlin for small favors.* Sitting up, Harry rubbed the remaining sleepiness out of his eyes then grabbed his glasses off the bedside table and put them on. He quickly noticed that he wasn't alone. In the bed to his left lay Remus sleeping on top of the covers while Sirius was in the same position on the bed to Harry's right. This usually meant that Sirius and Remus fell asleep at his bedside and Madam Pomfrey levitated them onto the beds.

Looking at his bedside table, Harry noticed his watch and glanced at the time to see it was already eight in the morning. He ignored his headache as he pushed back the covers, jumped out of bed and hurried over to Remus. Harry really hated having to wake him but there wasn't

really any time to waste. Carefully, Harry shook Remus' shoulder and the affects were instantaneous. Remus instantly sat up and looked around before settling his eyes on Harry.

"Moony is so funny when he wakes up startled," James chuckled.

"Next time I wake you up suddenly I'll give you a mirror," Remus grumbled.

Remus quickly turned and seemed to look over the boy for any sign of injury. "Harry, are you okay?" he asked quietly. "Are you in any pain?"

Harry was taken back by the urgency of Remus' voice. "Er—I just have a headache," he said truthfully. "Not a scar one, just regular." He paused for a moment as he looked around the room in confusion. "Why am I here? Did something happen on the way to the Gryffindor Tower?"

Remus' eyes widened as he cleared his throat nervously. "We're not sure what really happened, Harry," he said carefully. "It was almost like an outburst but your eyes weren't glowing like they normally do. You told me someone was in danger and you ran out of the castle and into the forest. You found Firenze last night. He was beaten by members of his clan. I went for help and when we came back you were unconscious next to Firenze. You were diagnosed with magical exhaustion. You don't remember any of this?"

Harry tried to think back to last night. It was like vague images in his mind but nothing clear. "I remember feelings," he said, still deep in thought. "Fear, pain, remorse. They're vivid. Almost like a dream." Harry looked at Remus nervously. He really didn't like not being able to remember things. "What's happening to me?"

"WE DON'T KNOW!" Lily cried hysterically.

Mrs. Potter held her and patted her hair trying to calm her, "There, there honey. Remus will have an answer."

Remus pulled Harry into an embrace. "I don't know, cub," he said.

Mrs. Potter glared at Remus who shrugged sheepishly.

"I know it wasn't Voldemort. Dumbledore's looking into it. Sirius and I *will* look into it, I promise. You're not alone, Harry. Remember that."

"See Mrs. P, we will figure things out," Sirius said as he tried blocking Remus from Mrs. Potter line of view with his body.

Harry nodded and pulled out of the embrace. "We better get moving," he said softly. "The Council meeting is in less than an hour."

Remus silently cursed and jumped off the bed. Harry grabbed his clothes and went to change in the bathroom while Remus woke Sirius. To say that he was scared was an understatement. Something had controlled him last night. No matter how good the intentions had been, Harry didn't like being controlled. If he had known Firenze had been in danger he would have gone to help. Why did something feel the need to take control of his body for something that he would have done naturally?

"YES! WHY?" James cried.

"I'm sure we will find out," Remus said nodding almost as if he was trying to convince himself.

A/N- Thanks for reading and reviewing!

A/N2- Answer to Gibby101 about my FictionPress story: No.

I can't elaborate more here or I'll spoil for those who haven't read it. Sorry. If you want to know more send me a signed review in one of my ffnet stories and I'll reply to that. Thank you.

Finally, I was able to finish this. Sorry!

Not mine.

Chapter 23

Expecto Patronum

For the next week, everything seemed to go back to normal...well, as much as it could for Harry. Thankfully Angelina had granted the team some time off so that left two extra nights

out of the week that could be dedicated to schoolwork. The Council had taken a step back with the difficulty the D.A. had during the previous lesson and started focusing on easier aspects to offensive dueling before they started work on Patronuses. They needed to keep everyone's spirits up in order to prevent the early frustration everyone was bound to feel.

"Oh, is Harry going to show his Patronus?" James asked eagerly jumping up and down on his butt.

Mrs. Potter eyed her son, "James, I know that someone so young having mastered the Patronus charm is quite remarkable but you don't have to get so excited."

"Oh, I think you'll be surprised Mrs. P," Remus said slyly.

The Gryffindor victory against Hufflepuff was the final straw for the majority of the Slytherins in Harry's year who went out of their way to stalk Harry whenever possible for an opportunity to curse him. Their presence was quickly noticed and Harry soon found that he was never alone. Fred and George took their own approach and made the sneaky group of Slytherins the main target of any pranks they could come up with. There were even times when Harry noticed Sirius in the halls talking quietly with the twins. If Harry didn't know better he would swear that Sirius had been helping the twins out.

"Harry! I'm hurt! You know better and you still doubt that I would help the twins! Of course I am!" Sirius said in a fake hurt tone.

Probably the biggest surprise of the week was that Harry was finally improving in Occlumency. He had surprised Professor Snape by pushing the man out after two memories on Sunday and had improved even further to pushing Snape out after one on Thursday. His shielding was also improving forcing Professor Snape to poke and pry for nearly fifteen minutes before being able to view a memory. To say that Snape was amazed with Harry's sudden improvement would be an understatement. He was caught without an insult to throw at Harry for the first time in over two and a half years.

"It would have been politer if he just complimented Harry instead of being unable to insult him," Mrs. Potter sniffed.

"Mrs. P, Mrs. P," Sirius shook his head, "Not being able to insult for Snivellus is a compliment."

Unfortunately Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore were having no luck into the strange occurrence that pulled Harry to find Firenze although Dumbledore did admit that he had a few suspicions. It didn't help that Firenze was being extremely tight-lipped, talking only in riddles

whenever he was confronted about what had happened after Remus had left for help that night. Harry didn't know who to be more aggravated with: Professor Dumbledore for not voicing his suspicions or Firenze for keeping quiet when he obviously knew something. Didn't they understand that Harry hated not knowing?

If they did they didn't seem to care. Harry understood that sometimes it was necessary to keep secrets but why did they feel the need to hide something about him from him? It just didn't make sense. He had a right to know why he couldn't remember what happened that night.

Homework was becoming more demanding pushing Harry to ask Remus for help when Hermione was too busy with her own assignments and helping Ron with his. Sirius was backlogged with essays from first through third years, something that made him scarce during the evenings. It was almost funny to see Sirius behind a mountain of parchment looking...well...serious but it also made Harry realize just how dedicated Sirius was to being a decent Defense teacher.

"Professor Padfoot!" James snickered.

"See Paddy," Remus patted Sirius' shoulder, "It's growing on you." Sirius just glared at him.

Walking back to the Gryffindor Tower from another long study session, Harry could barely keep his eyes open as he walked the path from memory. He had finally finished his Transfiguration essay that he had been working on for three days and really didn't want to think any more tonight. His head ached and at the moment taking a troll club to it seemed like an extremely good idea.

If he had been paying attention Harry would have known he wasn't alone before it was too late.

Just as Harry was about to step on the moving staircases he was hit in the left side sending pain throughout his body.

"WHAT? WHO HIT MY BABY? I WANT NAMES!" James yelled.

Falling to his knees, Harry flicked his wrist and instantly had his wand in hand before turning towards the threat. "*Lumos,*" he said through his teeth to reveal three familiar faces that had been hiding in the shadows. Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle. *Great. Just great.*

"Oh, so now Malfoy has his henchmen doing his dirty work for him!" Lily growled. "Can't even have the decency to show up personally."

"Well, well, well," Parkinson said with a smirk as she slowly approached. "It looks like 'Perfect Potter' is finally all alone. Not so tough without your fan club, are you?"

"He is so," James cried. "You'll be so sorry you cornered him!"

Harry smiled back as he stood up. "Attacking a student without justification, Parkinson," he warned. "You're a Prefect, aren't you? I would hate for you to lose your badge because Malfoy's too much of a coward to do his own dirty work."

"Good one Harry," Lily clapped. "Hit were it hurts!"

Parkinson's smirk turned into a glare as she jabbed her wand against Harry's chest. "Draco isn't the only one who has a problem with you, Potter," she hissed. "You may have every teacher in your pocket but as you can see it doesn't help you now, does it? Where are your precious *guardians* now, Potter? Did they want some alone time?"

Harry bit back the urge to curse Parkinson into oblivion. Why did everyone always pick on Sirius and Remus? *Because they know it bothers you.* Meeting Parkinson's eyes, Harry pushed her wand away. "Watch where you point that thing," he said through his teeth. "You're bound to hurt yourself. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll just be on my way."

"*Furnunculus!*" Parkinson shouted.

Harry quickly dodged as he pointed his wand at Parkinson. "*Expelliarmus!*" he said, sending her wand flying out of her hand. In one fluid motion Harry cast a body bind on Goyle and stunned Crabbe before either of them had the chance to react. As they fell to the ground, Harry turned back to Parkinson and holstered his wand. "My guardians taught me how to defend myself. Next time, I won't hold back, remember that."

"I think someone bit more than they could chew," Mrs. Potter snickered and then glared at the three boys who had their tongues sticking out at the book. Remus, who had the added feature of holding his hands, palms extended next, to his ears and was wriggling his fingers, quickly brought them down. "Really Remus, I expect better from you," Mrs. Potter chided.

Parkinson frantically searched for her wand as Harry walked up the stairs at a steady but quick pace. His left side was aching alerting Harry that he would most likely have a nasty

bruise tomorrow morning. *Price for letting my guard down.* The fact that he had disarmed and disabled the three Slytherins only made Harry angrier with himself. Parkinson never should have been able to hit him but she did because he hadn't been aware of his surroundings.

That hadn't be the last attempt for the Slytherins but it had been the last that Harry had been caught by surprise. It was ironic that he was using those who were trying to cause him harm to improve his reflexes but at least something good could come out of it. It was also gratifying to see the frustrated looks on their faces when Harry managed to block or counter any spell they sent his way no matter how distracted Harry appeared to be. Of course the detentions the Slytherins received when a staff member caught them in the act weren't so bad either.

February faded into March and the time came for the D.A. to begin learning Patronuses. The Council had been working on their own for a few weeks but were still having some difficulty maintaining a corporeal form which meant Harry and Remus would be running the meeting. To prevent the shocks that having Dementor-shaped Boggart in the meeting Harry and Remus had to change the strategy. Students would first practice the charm in a stress-free environment. Once they managed to create a corporeal Patronus, Remus would bring in a Boggart for one class period. Harry tried to protest that the students would need more time with a 'Dementor' but Remus wouldn't give in.

"I think two hours of you reliving your worst nightmares is more than enough, Harry," Remus had said. "Weakening you like that repeatedly especially with the state of things is only asking for trouble. You're also assuming that everyone is going to succeed. Don't get your hopes up. This is very difficult work. Remember it took you an entire school year to grasp it."

"Well said Remus," Lily huffed. "I'm sure they could use some other method than having Harry be affected by a Dementor!"

"Hum," James winced. "If they are having a hard time producing a Patronus in a stress-free environment it really isn't a great idea for them to have to produce a Patronus in front of a Dementor for the first time only when they are fighting for their soul."

"James! Whose side are you on?" Lily cried angrily.

"Harry's!" James said quickly, "But-"

"No buts," she said firmly and Mrs. Potter patted her proudly when James' mouth snapped close.

"Well done dear. You have to train them early. See if Harold tries disagreeing with me."

James gaped at his mother astonished.

Quidditch practices had also begun again for Gryffindor's final match of the season against Ravenclaw. Since the Seeker from each team was on the Council, Harry and Cho had quickly made an agreement to prevent any troubles after the game. Whatever happened on the field stayed on the field. Both Harry and Cho knew they were extremely competitive people and were determined to do whatever was necessary to win. There would be no ill feelings. It was just a game after all.

When the day to begin Patronuses finally arrived, everyone could barely hold back their excitement. This was the one thing everyone in the Defense Association had wanted to learn ever since the attack on the Hogwarts Express. Several had already begun research on the topic in hopes of an advantage since Remus had made it clear how difficult Patronuses may be for some people. Harry knew the speech well. He had heard it two years ago when he had been tutored by Remus.

Unlike other meetings, the Room of Requirement was now bare other than cushions on the floor and chairs against the wall. Since nothing would be needed today, nothing was provided. Students started to arrive while Harry and Remus ran over final meetings plans (and Remus attempted to keep Harry calm). It was Harry's first meeting without the Council in a long time and although Remus was there, Harry was basically on his own. Remus seemed to believe that this was some sort of final learning stage for Harry for some reason.

Once everyone had taken a seat, Remus gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before taking a few steps back and motioning for Harry to begin. "Well, I suppose I don't have to tell everyone what we're learning tonight," Harry said trying to calm his nerves. "The Patronus Charm is considered difficult for most because of the numerous aspects that need to happen at the same time. First off, you need to have the concentration on the spell itself. Second, you need to be completely focused on a happy memory in order to create the energy needed for a corporeal Patronus to form. The bigger the threat the happier the memory has to be for you. Thirdly, you need to be able to ignore the negative emotions and thoughts that Dementors make everyone feel. Since we are currently learning this in a Dementor-free environment we really don't have to worry about that but it is something to keep in mind."

With a flick of his wrist, Harry had his wand in hand and pointed it off to the side where no one was sitting. "*Expecto Patronum*," he said lazily. Everyone watched as a rush of silver mist

poured out of Harry's wand but no shape was taken. "If you harbor any doubts or don't put the energy behind the spell, all you will see is mist. A Patronus is an embodiment of positive emotion but it can't come out of thin air. You have to provide the fuel."

Taking in a breath, Harry focused on Christmas morning with Sirius, Remus and Tonks before shouting: "*Expecto Patronum!*" Students gasped as a large silver stag seemed to jump out of Harry's wand followed by a silver wolf and lastly a large silver shaggy dog.

Lily stopped reading to give Mrs. Potter time to recompose herself from her gaping.

"He has-" she stuttered.

"Yes," James nodded proudly.

"Three?" Mrs. Potter squeaked.

"Yep," Sirius puffed his chest. "Me, Prongs and Moony!"

Prongs seemed to glance around before moving over towards Remus, Moony sat down next to Harry and Midnight started running around the room like an excited puppy causing several students to laugh. Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses and shook his head slowly. For some reason he expected Midnight to act like this. *Because that's what Sirius would do.*

"Oh Harry," Sirius waved his hand at the book in fake embarrassment. "You know me so well."

"Midnight, you will behave or I'll send you down to visit with Professor Snape," Harry warned

Sirius gaped horrified at the book.

and was rewarded by the dog-like Patronus stopping in his tracks and grudgingly moved to Harry's side before sitting down with his shoulders hunched over. *Yep, exactly like Sirius.*

"You named your Patronuses?" Ernie Macmillian asked.

Harry nodded. "As you can see, a Patronus represents something positive in your life," he said then pointed over his shoulder to the stag. "Prongs, represents my dad." He then motioned to the wolf at his left side. "Moony represents Remus and Midnight represents Siri—er—Professor Black." He received a lot of confused looks. "Long story," he added. "Your own Patronus will most likely not be one of the creatures you see here. Everyone has their own influences in life shaping them into who they are and what they view as positive."

"How come you have three forms?" asked Zacharias Smith. "I thought you're only supposed to have one."

"It isn't common to have more than one form but it's not unheard of," Harry answered evasively. *I'm not odd. I'm not a freak.*

"Well, it is very rare," Mrs. Potter nodded with a pensive look. "But it shows Harry is very powerful," she smiled proudly.

"Everyone, pull out your wand." He waited until everyone did so. "Close your eyes and concentrate on a happy memory, a strong happy memory. It could be anything. Christmas morning...a birthday...Umbridge getting sacked" Quiet laughter could be heard. "Fall into the memory. Let the emotions fill you and say the incantation: *Expecto Patronum.*"

"*Expecto Patronum,*" everyone said. Brief puffs of silver mist shot out of several wands. It wasn't much but it was a start.

For the next two hours Harry pushed his patience to the limit. Quite a few were able to create silver smoke but it wasn't anywhere near having a form, something Remus had warned him about. Remus had jumped in to calm those who became frustrated. Both Harry and Remus tried to assure everyone their progress or lack thereof was normal. Harry even confided that he had similar problems when he had started learning the Charm which helped many relax and continue.

When the meeting was over, Harry had to watch the disappointed looks on everyone's faces as they left. He hated those looks. This had been the first lesson no one had grasped the material, including the Council. Harry encouraged everyone to practice for next week and told them where to turn if they had any questions. It wasn't much but for now it was all he and Remus could do. Intensive practice was the only thing that could help everyone now.

For the rest of March, the D.A. worked on Patronuses and held a few mock duels when students were becoming too frustrated. The most memorable one had been Fred against George since each twin seemed to have a sixth sense on what the other would do. After twenty minutes of appearance altering spells, Remus had to step in and call it a draw. It took Remus another fifteen minutes after that to counter all the spells. After that duel several people were able to create Patronuses of greater substance but nothing exactly corporeal yet.

Both Harry and Remus were caught by surprise during the final D.A. meeting before the Easter holiday when a corporeal Patronus appeared flying around the Room of Requirement in the shape of a silver swan. Everyone turned to see an ecstatic Cho Chang. Seeing that the task wasn't impossible seemed to be all it took and soon enough more had created their own corporeal Patronuses. Hermione's Patronus took the shape of a silver otter, Neville's was a silver lion, Hannah's was a large cat, Angelina's was a unicorn, and no one was surprised that Fred and George's Patronuses were a pair of hyenas. The twins even took the liberty of naming them 'Gred and Forge'.

Those who were able to create Patronuses now helped Harry and Remus in coaching everyone else. There were quite a few who were close and there were some that just seemed to be making no progress at all. The Creevey brothers were probably the two who were having the most difficulty which wasn't a surprise since they were two of the youngest in the group. Ginny and Luna seemed to be having similar problems with their own Patronuses making Harry wonder if it was a problem of age. The thought made Harry wonder if he would have managed his own Patronus if his magic hadn't begun to mature like it had.

"Probably not," Remus said. "As we grow our magic grows and we are capable of doing stronger magic. That is why the Hogwarts curric- humphmumph," he was stopped by Sirius' hand on his mouth. He stuck out his tongue and licked the hand.

"Urgh, Moony! That's disgusting!" Sirius cried wiping his hand on his robes.

"SIRIUS BLACK DON'T DO THAT!" Mrs. Potter scolded handing Sirius a handkerchief she conjured.

Harry had a hard time holding back the pride he felt towards those who had successfully cast the Charm and Remus was having a hard time holding back the pride he felt for Harry.

"I know," Remus said proudly with a goofy smile. The others shook their head but they had proud smiles too.

By Monday morning Professors Flitwick, Sprout, McGonagall and Dumbledore had all approached Harry and congratulated him on his success. Sirius had something else in mind. When the fifth years arrived to Defense class, they were surprised to see a dueling platform in the middle of the room. Evidently Sirius wasn't going to be covering theory today.

As soon as everyone entered Sirius jumped up on the dueling platform with his wand already in hand. "Good afternoon!" he said cheerfully.

"Always liked to be the center of attention," James shook his head fondly.

"You're just jealous you never thought of conjuring a platform so people could see you better," Lily smirked.

"I so did," James said in a mock offended tone, "But *he* wouldn't let me!" he finished pointing an accusing finger towards Remus.

"Today we're going to be doing something different. We will be taking everything we covered and observe it being used in an actual duel. Now, I need the guys to my left and the ladies to my right." Everyone moved to opposite ends of the platform. "Oh...Harry, could you please join me up here."

"That's not very fair separating them in groups like that," Remus frowned.

"And why would that be Remus?" Lily glared at him and was joined by Mrs. Potter.

"Uh- er- well," Remus stuttered, "Because the boys won't stand a chance," he said hopefully.

Mrs. Potter and Lily's glare diminished just slightly.

"Good save mate," Sirius patted Remus back.

Harry suppressed a grown as he removed his cloak before jumping up on the platform. Whatever Sirius had in mind Harry was pretty sure he wasn't going to like it. Sirius had made an effort not to singal Harry out before today since Harry had made it clear he didn't want the attention. Ever since the members of the D.A. had caught Harry training he had been extremely careful of not training in anywhere public. He didn't need people to stare at him again because he had been trained to defend himself.

"Yeah Sirius! He doesn't want that!" James growled.

"I'm sure I have a good reason," Sirius said faintly.

"This duel will be a group collaboration," Sirius continued. "The guys will be on my team and the ladies will be on Harry's. Each team will decide on a course of action their representative will take. Once your representative takes the platform, you are allowed to shout out *helpful*

hints but remember that any distraction could cost your representative the duel. You have fifteen minutes to determine your strategy. Go."

"Oh, so this is a duel between Harry and Sirius. That makes sense. Sirius asked Harry because since Harry knows more they can show more things," Mrs. Potter nodded and Sirius nodded with her eagerly.

"What are the restrictions?" Harry asked softly.

Sirius thought for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. "Anything goes," he said with a smile. "Except Unforgivables of course." Sirius thought for a moment then nodded. "Actually, nothing is allowed that can result in imprisonment of Azkaban or the hospital wing."

Harry nodded then joined his group at the end of the platform. He sat down facing his group, not really sure of what Sirius was trying to do with this. How could anyone accurately predict what someone else was going to do? Looking at his group, Harry could see that they were looking at him, slightly confused. He could only assume it was because of his question. "Anything goes means physical as well as magical," he clarified. "Professor Black doesn't like to lose. He *will* do whatever he can, including using his fists if he has to."

"Doesn't like to lose is putting it mildly. Remember that first time I beat him on a chess game?" Remus asked.

"Yes," James moaned. "He sulked and glared at Moony for weeks."

"So not true," Sirius huffed.

"Uh, Sirius. The whole House witnessed that reaction. Too many witnesses to deny it," Lily said cautiously and was glared at.

"But Professor Black is so nice," Parvati protested. "And—and he's your guardian, Harry. He would never do something like that to you."

"Denial," James shook his head.

"I think Harry's trying to tell us that Professor Black isn't above fighting dirty," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "This means we need to come up with a strategy that will counter the possibility. Does Professor Black have any weaknesses, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably his mouth," he said truthfully.

Remus and Lily grinned evilly and James and Mrs. Potter snickered. Sirius huffed.

"He's usually really controlled with me but when he's dueled Remus he has a tendency to focus more on what he's saying than what he's doing. Since he has an audience he may resort to that tactic to keep everyone into the duel. Other than that, he is a very offensive dueler. If he sees an opportunity he takes it because he does *not* like to be on the defensive."

"That doesn't surprise me," Hermione said thoughtfully. "What we need to do is surprise *him* so you can take the offensive, Harry." She tapped her finger on her chin as she tried to think of something. "What about the Patronus Charm? It certainly wouldn't be something anyone would expect to be used in a normal duel."

"And your Patronuses obey you, Harry," Lavender added. "You could tell them to distract Professor Black for you. Maybe that's the solution! Use Charms and Spells that you wouldn't normally use in a duel like *Lumos* and *Wingardium Leviosa*."

"Oh, that would be so funny. Midnight getting on Padfoot's way! Beaten by yourself!" James clapped his hands.

"That does sound like poetic justice," Lily chuckled.

"I sense people are routing for me to lose," Sirius said through narrowed eyes.

"Off course we are!" Remus exclaimed. "The alternative is Harry losing!"

"I'll cheer you both on," Mrs. Potter said kindly and Sirius looked at her weirdly.

"But one has to win!" he cried.

"Professor Black most likely knows your weaknesses too, Harry," Hermione added. "Do you know what your weaknesses are?"

Harry thought for a moment. Of course he knew what his weaknesses were. The question was if what he thought of as weaknesses were the same as Sirius'. "I guess the obvious fault is that I don't plan," he said. "I react instead of act." Harry couldn't help it. In the past he had only his instincts to rely on. It was extremely difficult to take the offensive when you were facing Voldemort in a duel.

Hermione rested a hand on Harry's arm and smiled. "I know it's easy for us to tell you what to do, Harry, but you will have to be the one facing Professor Black," she said gently. "Whatever you have to do, trust in yourself and do it."

"Time's up!" Sirius announced.

Harry stood up and with a flick of the wrist had his wand in hand. Turning to face Sirius, he couldn't believe the smile that was plastered on the man's face. Sirius was enjoying this too much. Their eyes met and at the sight of Harry's annoyed stare Sirius' smile faltered a little. They approached the middle of the platform and stood face to face. No words were passed but it was clear that Sirius realized Harry's displeasure of being singled out.

"I'm sure I'll apologize," Sirius said calmly.

"Off course you will, after all that is the matu-"

"MUM DON'T!" James cried clapping a hand over his mother's mouth and extracting it quickly as he remembered what happened to Sirius earlier.

They turned so they were back to back before taking the normal ten paces in their own direction. They turned back to face each other, bowed and took their stances.

"On the count of three," Sirius said. "One...two...three... *Expelliarmus!*"

"*Protego!*" Harry countered, deflecting the spell. "*Locomotor Mortis!*"

Sirius dodged the spell as he twisted his upper body and pointed his wand at Harry. "*Impedimenta!*" he said quickly. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Harry flipped backwards as the first spell flew over him and landed low allowing him to roll on his back so the second spell didn't hit him then flip to his feet. "*Immobulus!*" he shouted. "*Stupefy!*" He knew he needed to take the offensive soon. As Sirius blocked and dodged the two sides, Harry quietly conjured a mirror behind Sirius. "*Lumos Solem!*"

Sirius quickly turned away as intense light filled the room and came face to face with the mirror forcing him to close his eyes. Blindly, Sirius pointed his wand at where he thought Harry was and shouted. "*Nox!*" he shouted and the lighting returned to normal. "*Rictusempra!*"

"Expelliarmus!" Harry said quickly as he twisted his upper body to avoid the oncoming spell and saw Sirius block the spell. He quickly cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx as Sirius cast the Confundus Charm. The duel continued, both Harry and Sirius countering each other's moves while trying to play their own strategy. When Harry was caught off guard his physical defense prevented any spells from touching him. It appeared that Harry and Sirius were equally matched but it was more of the fact that they knew each other's styles too well. The restrictions Sirius put on the duel made it extremely hard for each of them to use powerful spells like they normally would. The lengths both of them would go to avoid a visit to the hospital wing was almost funny.

"Harry avoiding the Dragon is never funny. It's survival!" James said and the others rolled their eyes.

"Does Poppy know the pet-names you have for her?" Mrs. Potter asked.

James just stared at her shocked.

Sirius cast another Leg Locker Curse which Harry easily deflected. Taking the chance, Harry cast the Patronus Charm, filling the classroom with blinding silver light as Prongs, Moony and Midnight ran towards Sirius. Harry quickly cast a stunning spell as Sirius cast a disarming spell. Both spells met in the middle of the platform causing a magical shockwave which sent both Harry and Sirius flying backwards before landing on the platform with a thud.

Harry let out a groan as he sat back up, rubbing the back of his aching head.

"SIRIUS YOU HURT MY BABY!" Lily cried angry.

"Sorry, though he did hurt me too."

That was *too* similar to what happened in the graveyard for Harry's liking. Even though Harry had worked through that night it still had a tendency to haunt him at times. The memory of the pain and power those outbursts had given him still made Harry shudder. He never wanted to feel anything like that ever again.

Looking across the platform, Harry saw that Sirius was in the same state. "Well, I think we can consider that a draw," Sirius said as he stood up. "Now, what did you all observe?"

"See, that was my cheer," Mrs. Potter said. "Both won."

The kids just shook their heads.

"That we never want to be against either of you in a duel?" offered Dean causing several people to laugh.

Sirius grinned. "Not what I had in mind," he said as he winked at Harry then turned stern. "The hardest duel you will have is with someone who knows your strengths and your faults better than you do. I know Harry is a defensive dueler and I took advantage of it. Harry knows I'm an offensive dueler so he tried to do whatever he could to distract me. Sometimes you have to lose against your friends in order to win against your enemy. If a friend gives you advice, take it and use it. It could very well save your life."

Silence rang through the room as Harry stood up and jumped off the platform. So that was the point Sirius was trying to get across today. It was a good piece of advice.

"Off course it was. I'm a genius!"

"And so modest," Remus said sarcastically.

The question was whether people would take the advice to heart or not. There were quite a few people who had a problem accepting constructive criticism.

"Next duel," Sirius said as he jumped off the platform. "Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger."

Nearly everyone in the room groaned. That was a trip to the hospital wing waiting to happen.

Truthfully, it could have gone worse although how much worse Harry wasn't sure. Facing off Hermione's knowledge against Ron's temper had been simply asking for disaster. Ron didn't have much confidence going into the duel and it didn't help that his best friend was on Hermione's side to give her advice. Yes, Sirius had assigned it that way but Ron still was a little irritated by it. Ron had attacked hard from the start, something that Hermione had expected. Hermione had been patient, blocking and evading the spells Ron shot at her until Ron started to tire. The moment that happened she attacked and managed to trap him in a full body bind.

Ron didn't speak to Hermione or Harry for the rest of the day while he brooded in silence. The other duels had ended up pretty much the same way. Dean defeated Parvati, Seamus easily defeated Lavender, and Harry defeated Neville. Harry had held back significantly to give Neville a sporting chance but the Council member had accepted defeat even before the duel began. "I have no chance here but hopefully I can learn something from it," Neville had said

which had shocked everyone. It was an admirable attitude to have, something Sirius mentioned to the class. It was the attitude that everyone should have but few rarely took.

Remus and James pointed not even a little covertly to Sirius who just ignored them.

After all, who worried about learning when competitiveness overruled all thought?

"No one," Mrs. Potter huffed.

A/N-

I want to apologize for my delay in updating. I've had a hectic couple of weeks and had no time to write anything, for either of my stories. I don't know if you recall but a few chapters back I said that I had decided to post the chapter I had just finished even though I had nothing ahead, well, that caught on to me. I usually post when I have a few chapters ahead so I can keep a steady update. The only reason I was able to update "Life goes on" is because I have still a couple of chapters written and what I had to do was mostly spell checking and a little editing.

I am really sorry, such is the life of a freelance worker, we spend weeks with nothing and then we get called for a hundred of things at the same time. I hope to have a little more time as April starts.

Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Not mine

Chapter 24

Career Advice

During the Easter holidays, the fifth year students were bombarded with pamphlets, leaflets and notices concerning future careers. Harry really didn't know what to think since he had never really thought of life after Hogwarts before. Everything seemed to revolve around

Voldemort so how was he supposed to plan for the future when the present was constantly demanding for him to risk his life repeatedly?

"That is understandable," Mrs. Potter nodded.

"Still, how many fifteen-year-olds know what they want to do for the rest of their lives? I think it's too soon for us to choose," Lily complained. "I mean, if you think about it we have to start choosing at thirteen because some careers require Ancient Runes or Arithmancy and if you didn't choose those in your second year to start in your third you have already discarded those careers. How fair is that? How can they expect someone in their second year to be mature enough to choose like that!" she finished waving her arms around madly.

"Okay, calm, down, relax," James tried to soothe her. "As soon as we finish reading we will form the School system Revolutionary Army."

Lily huffed, "I'm being serious here!"

After looking at the notice board, Harry saw that he had a meeting with Professor McGonagall at half past two on Monday to discuss possibilities for the future. It was no surprise that Hermione had nearly twice as many pamphlets and leaflets than everyone else. It was clear she just grabbed everything since one minute she was reading about Muggle Relations and the next she was checking out what was required to train security trolls. Maybe he wasn't the only one who was completely clueless about life after Hogwarts.

"Definitely not," Sirius shook his head grimly.

The following morning Harry met with Sirius and Remus for some advice. Sirius instantly proposed Professional Quidditch claiming that Harry should have fun as long as humanly possible.

"YES!" James cried. "Quidditch!"

Remus, on the other hand, proposed teaching since Harry was doing so well with the Defense Association. Harry really wasn't eager for those choices.

"Harry!" James cried desperately tugging at his hair, "Quidditch!"

He loved to fly but he had a feeling that doing it professionally would take the fun out of it.

"Nothing takes the fun out of Quidditch Harry," James moaned. "It's Quidditch!"

The other occupants of the room could just shake their heads.

He also enjoyed his role with the D.A. but he didn't know if he wanted to do it for a living.

So Monday afternoon arrived and Harry still had no idea of what career he wanted to pursue. Reaching Professor McGonagall's office, Harry hesitated for a moment before knocking. He knew everyone expected him to be some warrior to defend the innocent but was that who he actually was? Not really. He defended what he believed in but the thought of killing someone made him ill. He didn't want to hurt people. So what did he want to do?

"Come in," Professor McGonagall's voice beckoned from inside the office.

Opening the door, Harry was surprised to see that Professor McGonagall wasn't alone. Professor McGonagall was sitting behind her desk while off to the left were three individuals Harry had never seen before. There was a tall wizard with light brown hair farthest from the door who gave Harry a friendly smile. Beside him was a witch with long blond hair and a soft smile on her face. Nearest to the door was a wizard of average height with extremely short sandy blond hair. He seemed to look at Harry for a long moment before nodding.

Harry suddenly felt extremely self conscious. What were they doing here? "Er—I'm sorry," he said nervously. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"Yes, Harry," Lily said wisely. "Back away slowly."

"They aren't wild animals Lily," Sirius chuckled.

"Can you prove that?" Lily said with a raised eyebrow.

"Back away slowly Harry," Sirius said.

"You're not interrupting, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said sternly, passing on to Harry the silent message that she did not approve of the presence of the three individuals. "Mr.

Andrews, Miss Winters and Mr. Grint have been sent here from their places of employment for a few words with you."

That was unexpected. Harry remained standing in the doorway not really sure how to take that bit of news. "Why?" he asked bluntly. "I haven't done anything wrong, have I?"

"Off course not," Mrs. Potter said kindly. Then she frowned grimly, "I have a feeling I know what this is about."

"Mr. Potter," the tall wizard said professionally. "You certainly haven't done anything wrong. We are here to assist you in planning for the future. I am Wesley Grint and I represent the Department of Law Enforcement, Auror Division. Next to me is Evelyn Winters who is from the Public Relations office at the Ministry and next to her, Daniel Andrews from the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

Harry glanced at Professor McGonagall who was sitting rather stiffly before returning his attention to the representatives from the Ministry. "Siri—er—Professor Black and Remus didn't say anything about people being here from the Ministry," he said cautiously.

"Yeah, we didn't!" Sirius nodded. "Get out!"

"I was under the impression it would just be Professor McGonagall and myself."

"It normally is, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said with a nod. "However, the Ministry apparently felt you would need assistance in *your choices*.

"Hey, we're assisting fine enough!" Remus growled offended.

Your guardians are not aware of this...yet

"Oh, but you won't like it when we do become aware of this!" Sirius said threateningly and James nodded his approval.

and Professor Dumbledore isn't too pleased with their unannounced arrival. He feels this is only adding additional pressure which you don't need. Nevertheless it is *your choice*. If you wish to talk with these people, you are free to do so."

Harry inhaled deeply in an attempt to bury his anger. He understood what was going on. The Ministry wanted to pitch possible areas of employment for the-boy-who-lived. They wanted him for his name, not of his academic or recreational accomplishments. "If this isn't offered to everyone then I must decline," Harry said evenly.

"He, he, in your face!"

"James!"

"What mom?" he asked innocently.

The three representatives moved to protest. "I don't mean to sound rude but I refuse to be given special treatment for something I can't even remember. *If* I were to decide to apply for any of your departments I want to earn my position. I am just like everyone else here and I expect to be treated that way."

Evelyn Winters and Daniel Andrews were about to protest but were stopped when Wesley Grint stepped forward. "We can accept that, Mr. Potter," he said with a nod. "We apologize for taking up your time." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "We apologize for the intrusion, Professor." Without another word, the three representatives left.

"At least he has *some* sense," Lily mumbled.

Harry stepped out of the doorway to let them pass then let out a frustrated sigh. Suddenly planning for the future was the last thing Harry wanted to do. At the moment working in the Muggle world seemed like an overly appealing option. There he would be treated normally just as long as he stayed away from Surrey. *That* was what he wanted. He wanted to do something where he could be 'just Harry'. The problem was finding something like that in the wizarding world was going to be near impossible.

The sound of the door closing pulled Harry out of his thoughts. Turning towards the noise, Harry noticed Professor McGonagall standing by the now closed door. "I apologize, Harry," she said sincerely. "With the current events, several organizations in the Ministry seem to be rather persistent. Defending the train like you did in September attracted the attention of the Auror Division, your Quidditch record attracted the attention of the Magical Games and Sports Department, and I don't think I need to explain the public relations. You were right. They were here because of your name. Many feel that it is only a matter of time before the Minister is removed from office so they want to show their support to the one they should have believed all along."

"Too little, too late," James huffed crossing his arms.

Professor McGonagall gently took Harry by the arm and led him to the chair in front of her desk. "Have a seat, Harry," she offered then moved to her chair behind the desk that was littered with pamphlets. "Let's see if we can discuss your career ideas and decide which subjects you shout continue into your sixth and seventh years. Do you have any thoughts of what you would like to do after leaving Hogwarts?"

"No, I have no idea what I want to do!" Sirius sighed. "And now we have to choose what classes we keep and what we drop and what if I drop one that I find out later that I needed because I decide to be a chef and needed cooking classes?"

"Hogwarts doesn't give cooking classes Sirius!" James laughed.

"And she was asking Harry," Lily reminded him.

"But I am confused!" Sirius cried.

"You're not the only one," Remus patted his back.

Harry shook his head as he set his schoolbag on the floor, his eyes focused on the pamphlets. At the moment he had a clearer idea of what he didn't want to do than what he wanted to do.

"Very well," Professor McGonagall said carefully. "Perhaps we are thinking too narrow. Don't think of a specific position, Harry. What do you want to do in general?"

Harry thought for a moment. He really didn't want to do anything in the public eye since he hated attention but he couldn't just sit back and do nothing. "I guess I want to help people," he said with a shrug. "I—I just don't know how."

"We can work with that," Professor McGonagall said as she pulled out a few pamphlets from the group and opened one of them. "You could choose to be an Auror, however I should warn you that it isn't an easy career path. You need a minimum of five NEWTs and nothing under 'Exceeds Expectations' as a grade. After that, you would need to undergo a rigorous series of tests on character and aptitude."

"Oh, too bad Padfoot. You wouldn't pass the character test! I don't think they take loonies!"

"Like you would James!"

"Boys!" Mrs. Potter scolded.

Very few are taken. As a matter of fact, I don't believe anyone has been taken in the past three years."

"So the last class to be taken was Tonks' class. Interesting," Remus said.

"Why?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"Don't know," he shrugged. "Just seemed like a good comment to make."

Professor McGonagall set the pamphlet down and looked at Harry, waiting for him to meet her gaze. "For subjects, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, and Potions would be required. I should warn you, Harry, I only accept students in my NEWT classes who achieve an 'Exceeds Expectations' or higher at the Ordinary Wizarding Level, which you currently have." She pulled out what appeared to be a file folder and opened it. "According to your instructors your grades have been improving over the past few years. The only questionable class would be Potions where you're averaging between an 'Acceptable' and 'Exceeds Expectations'. I will also warn you that Professor Snape only accepts students who achieve an 'Outstanding' on their OWLs."

"Git," the five mumbled and the four teens looked at Mrs. Potter who coughed to cover her slip.

Working a little harder in that class wouldn't hurt."

"Hey, Harry works hard enough!" Mrs. Potter defended. "It's that man who isn't fit to teach a flobberworm much less children!"

Harry fought hard to hold back a snort. He could invent a potion that would cure all diseases and it still wouldn't receive an 'Outstanding' mark from Professor Snape. It was better to just accept that Professor Snape would never have an open mind when it came to a child of the Marauders. Luckily for Harry, Professor Snape wouldn't be testing him so he at least had some hope that he could test well on his OWL.

"Another option is Healing," Professor McGonagall said as she picked up a leaflet. "It is similar to the Auror requirements for classes except for the requirement of Herbology. You would need at least an 'Exceeds Expectations' at NEWT level in Herbology in addition to your other NEWTs. There will also be training after you graduate. Perhaps that is more suitable for you, Harry. I must say you spend enough time in the hospital wing as it is. You might as well make use of your time there."

"Hey! That's the Dragon's fault! She has evil powers that make us go there even if we'd rather not!" James cried.

"I am sure Madam Pomfrey isn't cursing you just to see you more James," Lily snorted.

"I wouldn't be so sure," James said shaking his head firmly.

"Hey!" Harry exclaimed in offense. "Most of the time it's not my fault."

Professor McGonagall stared at Harry as a smile slowly appeared on her face. "I'm kidding, Harry," she said. "Of course there is also teaching which would require some mastery in the area you wish to teach...unless the Headmaster can't find anyone to take the position...or you're appointed by the Ministry. You would also need NEWTs in the core subjects: Herbology, Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Astronomy, and Charms. I must say your group is every indication that you would be an excellent teacher."

"But I'm not instructing most of the time," Harry protested. "I usually stand off in the corner—"

"—who is the one to instruct the Council?" Professor McGonagall countered. "If you were to tell me a year ago that Neville Longbottom would be able to create a corporeal Patronus in a year's time, I would've had you committed to St. Mungo's. I don't think you see what a positive influence you are, Harry. So many students in your group have changed for the better because of you. *That* is the type of person a teacher is. I understand that you strongly dislike the abundance of attention you receive but did you ever consider that you may deserve it?"

Harry scowled as he looked away. He immediately knew this was one fight he wasn't going to win.

"I'm afraid I can't help you in regards to the attention from the female population of this school," McGonagall said causing Harry to look at her in confusion. "I suggest you speak to your guardians about that. As far as the rest of the attention, I won't deny that you are a role model, Harry. The students look up to you and personally I am grateful that they have someone like you to admire. You are a fine young man, Harry. You're parents would certainly be proud of you."

"To right we are," Lily said and James puffed his chest.

Harry let out a sigh. How was he supposed to respond to that? He didn't want to believe it but he was to the point that he realized arguing wasn't going to get him anywhere. Everyone had their opinion and nothing he said was going to change it. It had probably been one of the bigger lessons he had learned from Sirius and Remus. People are going to believe what they want to believe. As long as you stay true to your own beliefs that's all that matters.

Professor McGonagall stood up and walked around her desk so she was standing in front of him. "As far as career options, I'll leave the three choices in your file for now" she said with a soft smile. "Sometime it's better to leave your options open. They are all honorable

professions, Harry. If you have any questions about any of them, I'm sure Auror Tonks, Madam Pomfrey or any instructor here would be willing to help. All you have to do is ask."

Harry nodded feeling a little guilty that he was having such a difficult time with this. "Is—er—is this normal?" he asked quietly. "Not knowing, I mean."

Mrs. Potter chuckled, "Oh, please Harry. No one knows what they want to do for the rest of their life at fifteen. That is absolutely normal."

Professor McGonagall gave Harry's arm a reassuring squeeze. "Of course it's normal," she said. "I can't think of a single student I've had who had a clear picture of what they wanted as a career at fifteen and ended up following through with it for the rest of their life. This was only to make you aware of *possible* options so you could prepare yourself properly, understand?"

"See?" Mrs. Potter said.

Harry nodded again as he stood up, grabbing his schoolbag on the way. "Thanks, Professor," he said tiredly. "I guess it's just a lot to take in."

"Very well," McGonagall said with a smile. "If you have no other questions, I suppose this concludes the consultation." Harry turned to leave. "Oh...and Harry, I'm proud of how you handled the presence of the Ministry employees. If anything, you may have increased their interest in you."

"I don't think that was what he was aiming for," Remus shook his head.

Harry couldn't help but groan as he walked out of Professor McGonagall's office causing her to laugh. If anything having the three departments present had created a negative affect on Harry. He didn't like people who tried to push their beliefs on others. It reminded him too much of Fudge and Umbridge. At the moment Harry desperately wanted to smash his fist into a wall. Why would anyone still be interested in someone after that person kicked them out of the room? It didn't make any sense.

Not in the mood to put up with Divination, Harry went directly to the Defense classroom and waited until class was over. He tried to run through some calming techniques but he was just too frustrated to concentrate. He didn't even know why the entire situation bothered him so much. A few departments at the Ministry tried to gain the friendship of the-boy-who-lived. So what? It wasn't like it hadn't happened before.

But I've never been caught off guard like this before.

"You are being too harsh on yourself Harry," James said sympathetically.

The sound of the bell pulled Harry out of his thoughts. Leaning against the wall, Harry waited until everyone had filed out of the room before entering. He walked to his normal seat in the front of the room before dropping his school bag on the desk before collapsing in the chair. He didn't even notice that Sirius was in the room, watching him intently. Closing his eyes, Harry tried desperately to bury his mess of emotions. He needed to do something or else he felt like he was going to explode.

"Harry, is something wrong?" Sirius asked carefully from behind his desk. "Did something happen during your consultation?"

"SIRIUS! Don't make naïve questions!" James cried.

Harry snorted. "Nothing at all," he said sarcastically. "No one from the Ministry came wanting to pitch why they wanted the-boy-who-lived working for them." Sirius instantly rose to his feet. "It's not like I'm an actual person with choices to make. I'm just a tool, a publicity prop for everyone to wave around as they please." Harry slammed his fists on his desk, his frustration getting the better of him unaware that several objects in the room were starting to shake. "I hate this! Why can't they just leave me alone?"

Sirius was at Harry's side in an instant. He knelt down and turned Harry so their eyes met.

"McGonagall allowed this?" he asked in confusion. "Dumbledore allowed this?"

"He, he, I think McGonagall and Dumbledore are going to be in a spot of trouble," Lily chuckled evilly.

"Just a spot?" James asked wriggling his eyebrows and pointing at Sirius who was rubbing his hands together.

The shaking objects slowly stilled. "Evidently the representatives were extremely persistent," Harry muttered as he looked away as he let out a sigh. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just really stressed out with everything that's going on. This was the last thing I needed today." Harry returned his gaze to Sirius with a pleading look on his face. "Is it too late to change my name?"

Sirius laughed as he ruffled Harry's hair. "I'll talk to Moony about it," he said then turned serious. "I will talk to McGonagall and Dumbledore about this, Harry. They should have contacted Remus or me the moment anyone expressed interest to see you. I made it clear to Dumbledore that even though I'm here to teach, you are my top priority." Sirius stood up and pulled out his wand.

"Oomph-" Sirius grunted as James threw himself at him.

"My hero!" James cried and the other three couldn't help but laugh.

With a few flicks, his desk was transfigured into a dueling platform and the student desks were against the wall. "How about a short duel before class begins? You look like you need it."

"Padfoot, Padfoot, Padfoot," Remus shook his head. "Do you realize what you are setting yourself up to?"

"Hey, we tied the last one!" Sirius cried defensively.

"I'm sure you'll tie this one too," Mrs. Potter said gently.

"Nah," Sirius shook his head. "I'll probably win. Last time I was holding back."

James and Lily started making bets.

"Oi, none of that!" Sirius cried.

"How much on Harry?" Remus asked.

"MOONY! Et tu?"

Harry stood up and nearly jumped as his chair suddenly moved to the wall to join the others. Removing his robe and tossing it aside, Harry moved automatically to the platform. He jumped up with Sirius following him. No words were said. Both of them knew each other's motions by heart. They took their designated steps apart before turning and the duel began. Harry immediately took the offensive and Sirius retaliated. Nothing dangerous was cast but the power behind the spells made it clear that they weren't holding anything back.

Sirius managed to disarm Harry first

"Ha!" Sirius cried triumphantly.

but it didn't last long since Harry was able to recall his wand silently.

Remus raised an eyebrow at Sirius who scowled.

Catching his wand, Harry dodged the oncoming spell as he cast a series of spells at Sirius, disarming him. Sirius was close enough to start a physical attack. Harry quickly re-holstered his wand and blocked any punches and kicks that came his way while managing to get a few of his own in. Seeing his opportunity, Harry jumped up, pulling his knees to his chest before pushing them out forcefully and hitting Sirius in the chest. Sirius let out an 'oomph' as he fell backwards. Harry repositioned his body in mid air, landing on one knee. He instantly flicked his wrist and grasped his wand as he stood, pointing it at Sirius who was now flat on his back.

"Yield?" Harry asked.

"Yield," Sirius confirmed in a tense voice as he sat up and grabbed his chest.

James and Remus started collecting Lily's money.

"Lily!" Sirius cried delighted losing his scowl. "You bet on me?"

"Yes," Lily huffed. "That will teach me to doubt Harry."

"Ow, Harry. That really hurt. Next time I'll call Moony and let him duel with you."

Remus cuffed Sirius' head who was laughing.

Harry let out a sigh as he holstered his wand once again and helped Sirius stand. "Sorry Sirius," he said sincerely. It was then Harry realized how badly he had lost control. He had let his emotions and instincts guide him rather than logical thought. "Should I get Madam Pomfrey?"

Sirius glared at Harry. "Don't you dare," he warned then grinned. "However, I reserve the right to a rematch and next time, I won't hold anything back. You're getting good, kiddo."

"See, I was holding back," Sirius nodded pleased.

"That's what all the losers say Paddy," James chuckled and received a pillow to his face in retaliation.

The sound of someone clearing their throat caused both of them to jump and turn to see the entire class standing by the door with wide eyes. Harry and Sirius held back a groan. Both of them had forgotten about closing the door and locking it. Harry and Sirius could only imagine what seeing the two of them dueling like they had been must have looked like to someone who didn't know what had happened beforehand.

Silence was finally broken by Ron. "What in the bloody hell was that?" he asked loudly causing quite a few to laugh.

"We can always count on Ron for the subtlety," Lily chuckled fondly.

Sirius jumped off the platform with Harry following him. "I'll ignore the language...this time," the Animagus said with a smirk.

"Who would have ever thought that one day I would hear Sirius Black admonishing someone for the language they were using?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"It was your good example Mrs. P," Sirius said.

"Kiss ass," James mumbled. Lily smacked him lightly.

He looked around and found his wand on the ground at the end of the platform. He then picked it up and with a few flicks the classroom was back to as it should be. "Everyone take a seat so we can get started. Your OWL exams are approaching quickly and we still have much to cover."

Everyone took their regular seat, Ron quickly sitting down next to Harry. "So what happened?" he whispered. "It looked like you two were trying to kill each other."

Harry looked at Ron with a raised eyebrow. That had been the last thing they had been doing but he could see where someone may think as much. "My consultation with McGonagall didn't go so well," he said softly. "Dueling was a way of not thinking about it and releasing some steam. How much did everyone see?"

"Just the physical part," Ron said as he glanced over at Hermione. "So what happened during your consultation?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "People from the Ministry came," he said as he rolled his eyes in annoyance. "I kicked them out. I guess I was having enough trouble trying to think of a career without them complicating matters; telling me that how great it would be for *the-boy-who-lived* to join their department."

Ron winced at Harry's sarcastic tone. "Sorry to hear that, mate," he said sympathetically. "Did you decide on a career?"

Harry shook his head before turning his attention to Sirius, his consultation pushed to the back of his mind in order to concentrate. Sirius had a very good point. The OWLs would be here soon. He may not know what he wanted to do after Hogwarts and right now it didn't matter. All he could do was prepare for the upcoming exams and from there he could look at his options. At the moment though, Harry wasn't too keen on considering any position at the

Ministry. Maybe in time that would change but currently Harry just had too much resentment towards the place that had caused him and his current family so much pain.

"I definitely can't see Harry working at the Ministry," Remus nodded.

The following day Harry was surprised that Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall had sought him out to apologize for not sending the representatives from the Ministry away. Harry tried to assure his Head of House and his Headmaster that he didn't blame them but apparently Sirius had given both of them quite an earful.

Sirius and Remus smiled pleased.

Remus had also managed to corner Harry and offer an ear if Harry needed to talk. Harry insisted he was fine but Sirius and Remus rarely believed that excuse anymore. It had been used too often while Umbridge had been at Hogwarts.

"Yes, Harry's 'I'm fine' can range anywhere from, 'I'm okay' to 'I'm bleeding to death but I don't want to bother'," Lily huffed.

Harry wasn't able to think about what happened for long with as hectic as his schedule had become. Once again he found any sort of free time limited to mornings before classes. The final game of the season was approaching for Quidditch and Gryffindor was the top qualifier for the Quidditch Cup, Professor Snape was pushing Harry even harder now in Occlumency, the Council had decided to begin using Sirius' approach by using what they had learned by dueling which meant everyone in the Council had to know all of the guidelines in dueling, and of course the never ending schoolwork was a constant problem now for all fifth years.

He was pulled out of his routine a week after his consultation when Remus pulled him out of Divination and took directly to Professor Dumbledore's office. Upon entering, Harry was hit was a feeling of déjà vu when he saw that Dumbledore wasn't alone. Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt were standing stiffly in front of Dumbledore's desk. Harry recognized that stance. It was Tonks' 'I'm on duty' stance.

"She has one?" Sirius asked.

"Of course she does," Mrs. Potter said. "Harold has one too."

"Yeah," Sirius said as he wrinkled his nose. "But Tonks' is hard to imagine since now all she does is run around knocking stuff down while preferably covered in all kinds of unidentified sticky substances."

"Please come in, Remus, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly as he rose to his feet. "There are a few matters we need to discuss."

Harry followed Remus to the chairs placed in front of Dumbledore's desk and sat down. Glancing over and the two Aurors, Harry caught a wink from Tonks and a slight smile from Shacklebolt. That was odd. Kingsley Shacklebolt rarely was anything but professional. Harry returned his attention to Dumbledore and noticed the large pile of parchment on the desk. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry couldn't help but notice how stiff Remus was sitting. That was a key indicator that something was going on.

James had hopped on the bed and started massaging Remus' shoulders. Remus turned his head to look back at James and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I'm trying to get you to un-stiffen," James said. Remus pointed to James' place on the floor and James huffed as he went back, "Can't even do something nice."

"I should inform you, Harry, that earlier today Cornelius Fudge was voted out of office by the majority of the Wizengamot," Professor Dumbledore said in his normal pleasant voice. "It seems that in light of recent events many have lost their confidence in the Minister's leadership."

"Oh, really? Why would they ever?" Lily asked sarcastically.

Harry couldn't believe it. Fudge was gone? It seemed too good to be true. Cautiously Harry glanced over at Tonks and Shacklebolt who nodded in confirmation. Now he understood why they were acting so uncharacteristically happy...well, at least Shacklebolt was. Tonks always seemed to be happy.

"Until an official election can be held," Professor Dumbledore continued, "Amelia Bones will be the acting Minister for the present time and her first order of business was to begin a formal investigation concerning the interview you had given Rita Skeeter to determine if Voldemort has in fact returned. Tonks and Kingsley are here to take your 'official statement'. I believe Amelia wanted to make the situation as painless as possible by sending a 'relative'."

"And she is trying to get into Harry's good grace," Mrs. Potter sniffed. "Amelia is a fair woman but that move was not subtle at all."

"That explains Tonks but not Kingsley," Remus said cautiously. "I was under the impression that Amelia wasn't aware of who was in the Order."

"I volunteered," Kingsley said simply. "A senior Auror was needed and I was the first choice since Tonks and I have worked together before. Amelia isn't aware that I even know Harry. She questioned me extensively to ensure that I would treat him fairly." Shacklebolt turned his attention to Harry and bit back a smile. "You've left quite an impression on the upper ranked, kid. Grint has been telling everyone about your little encounter with him for the past week. Evidently he found the entire situation rather amusing."

"Which was not what Harry was aiming for," Lily sighed.

Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head in annoyance. "I don't see why," he muttered. "I just kicked him out—"

"—which is something that very few would do, Harry," Tonks said seriously. "Most people would take advantage of the opportunity that had been placed in front of you but you didn't. You insisted on being treated like everyone else. Even with everything that's happen there are a lot of people who still have the misconception that you enjoy the publicity."

"So what is the 'official story'?" Remus asked returning to the main topic of discussion.

"Trust Moony to not let the subject wonder away," Sirius chuckled.

"I believe the story Harry told Rita will suffice," Professor Dumbledore answered. "We just need to know exactly what changes were made. With the 'Daily Prophet' aligning itself with Harry we really shouldn't chance discrediting them."

"I didn't change anything," Harry said with a shrug. "I just didn't mention everything that having to do with the outbursts, our wands or the echoes, you know that. I just said that Voldemort faltered and I ran for the cup. Rita assumed that all my injuries came from the duel."

"Credible," Mrs. Potter nodded.

Dumbledore thought for a moment then looked at Harry pensively. "Amelia won't accept assumptions, Harry," he said patiently. "She *will* want to know the reason for every one of the injuries you sustained. We managed to keep your heart condition quiet but the school did learn of your lungs collapsing and needing an oxygen mask to help you breathe afterwards. I have no doubt Susan passed that bit of news on to her aunt. We need to tread carefully, Harry. If Amelia were to request your medical record she would learn of the multiple instances of magical exhaustion."

"For starters, unless Harry is a ward of the Ministry, she can't do that. Secondly, the injuries being from a duel with Voldemort and his Death Eaters is quite credible so stop trying to do politics with my grandson Dumbledore!" Mrs. Potter said sternly.

"But she would need either Sirius' or my permission in order to see Harry's medical record," Remus countered. "I was there when Harry gave the interview, Dumbledore. Who's to say Harry hadn't received his injuries during the duel? He had been slammed into a tree! If Amelia Bones has any questions she is more than welcomed to speak to either Sirius or me. Regardless of what *some people* may think Harry's life isn't available for public knowledge. Fudge tried to cross that line multiple times. We stepped in then and we'll step in now."

"Moony to the rescue!" James cried delighted.

"See, Mrs. P. I pay attention," Remus said pleased that his future self had basically said the same as Mrs. Potter.

"I know *you* do. It's these two who worry me," Mrs. Potter said pointing to Sirius and James who looked back innocently.

Professor Dumbledore let out a sigh. "Remus, I'm not your enemy here," he said tiredly. "We both know the rules rarely apply when Harry is concerned no matter how hard we try to prevent it."

"Which is why Sirius and I are here," Remus said firmly. "I understand you are trying to gain an ally but personally, I could care less. I believe Sirius has made his opinions well known when he accepted his position. I happen to agree with him. Harry has already put enough on the line to help you out. Must I remind you that it's because of him that Umbridge is in Azkaban, the public knows of Voldemort's return and now Fudge has been removed from the Minister position?"

"You don't have to remind me, Remus," Dumbledore said evenly. "I am well aware that the Order is indebted to Harry. I just want to avoid any problems in the near future. There are still many in the Ministry who would try to use someone with Harry's abilities for their own gain. We need to ensure there are no holes whatsoever in Harry's story."

"And by any chance do you think Remus and Sirius didn't ensure that before?" Lily asked annoyed. "Of course they did!"

"Which we will do," Tonks said in a serious tone that sounded so unlike her. "Do you really think either of us would do anything that would put Harry in danger? Bones is the Head of the Department of Law Enforcement. We know what to expect from her, Dumbledore. You also forget that unlike Fudge, Bones won't overstep her boundaries when it comes to Harry's rights."

Harry rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. From the sounds of it he wasn't the only one who was overstressed. He couldn't help feeling uncomfortable with the fact that everyone was arguing because they were trying to protect him. They were arguing about him almost

like he wasn't even there. "I appreciate your concern, Professor but I can't change the story now," Harry said evenly. "The 'Daily Prophet' made a rather bold move by taking my side. From what I've heard about Madam Bones, she appears to be a fair woman. I have been having these outbursts since my third year and no one had found out about them on their own. I'm not saying there's nothing to worry about but all of the necessary precautions have been taken, right?"

"He has a point, Dumbledore," Kingsley added. "I understand your need to be cautious but no one's questioned the kid's injuries before. With as ruthless as Voldemort is, no one in their right mind would question Harry's injuries. At the moment scrutinizing what injuries Harry may or not have had is the last on the list of priorities. Bones is focusing on whether Voldemort has indeed returned and the Death Eaters who were there that night."

"Very well," Professor Dumbledore said finally. "We should get started then."

Harry and Remus retold the story that had been relayed to Rita Skeeter. Tonks documented everything while Shacklebolt questioned a few points. Professor Dumbledore remained silent the entire time which Harry didn't know how to interpret. He could tell Dumbledore wasn't pleased that he had been overruled but he just couldn't understand what the Headmaster was so worried about. Sirius and Remus had approved of the story and they were as overprotective as one could be.

"Exactly!" James cried raising his arms.

The moment they were finished Remus pulled Harry out of Dumbledore's office claiming Harry had classes to attend. Harry didn't miss the look of disappointment on Professor Dumbledore's face or the look of sympathy on Tonks'. Something was definitely going on here and from the way Dumbledore and Remus were acting it has been going on for quite some time. Harry had known that Sirius and Remus had a few concerns on some of the decisions Dumbledore had made but he never thought it was anything to worry about. Clearly he had been wrong.

"Remus, why did you act like that?" Harry asked quietly. "Professor Dumbledore was just trying to help."

Remus instantly stopped and glanced at Harry before pulling him into an empty classroom. He closed the door as he pulled out his wand and cast a silencing charm. "I know what it must have looked like, Harry, but you have to understand something. Dumbledore is not only the Headmaster of Hogwarts. He is also the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, a secret organization that needs every chance it can get to gain the upper hand in the war. Gaining an ally like Amelia Bones would be extremely beneficial so Dumbledore may be extremely accommodating to guarantee her support. Sirius and I understand that but we are not going to let him use you to accomplish that."

"Definitely not!" Sirius agreed.

"He's not using me," Harry protested. "This is all from something *I* did, remember? *I* was the one who talked to Rita Skeeter. Professor Dumbledore had nothing to do with that. I know there's probably quite a bit going on with the Order that I don't know about but—"

"Harry, listen to me," Remus said as he rested his hands on Harry's shoulders. "I know this may seem confusing but you'll just have to trust Sirius and me. We made our priorities clear to Dumbledore that if we would have to choose between you and the Order, we would choose you. At the moment your protection is what matters. I know Dumbledore cares for you but he has a war to worry about. He's considering the larger picture. Don't get me wrong, someone has to. We just want to make sure you're not caught in the middle of this. Even though you have already been through so much, you're still in school. You still have the right to be a kid."

Remus and Sirius were assaulted by three huggers.

Looking into Remus' eyes, Harry couldn't help but agree. Remus was begging for Harry to trust him no matter what Harry's personal opinions may be. He may not understand completely what was going on between Dumbledore and his guardians but he had a pretty good picture. He couldn't fault Dumbledore for concentrating on the war. It was certainly more important at the moment. Harry may not like the hostility between Dumbledore and his

guardians but at the moment there was nothing he could do about. He could only hope that the three wizards would find a happy medium sooner rather than later.

"I'm afraid that won't happen while the war is going on," Remus said sadly. "Dumbledore will still have to see the big picture and we will still protect Harry."

.....

A/N- Once again. Sorry for the late update. Hectic life combined with longer than usual chapter. Next chapter is also a long one so there is a chance of delay again! SORRY!

Thank you all for reading and I loved your reviews.

Not mine.

Chapter 25

Friendly Opponents

When the following morning arrived, the news of Fudge's removal from office covered the front page of the 'Daily Prophet'. Excited chatter immediately broke out, everyone appearing to have their own opinion to the type of Minister Cornelius Fudge had been. Susan Bones became an instant celebrity since her aunt was now the acting Minister, something that she really didn't appreciate. She had made it clear when the Death Eaters had broken out of Azkaban that she hated the type of attention that always followed Harry like a shadow.

In light of what Remus had said, Harry made a point to avoid Professor Dumbledore in every way possible which wasn't difficult. The absence of a Minister had left the Ministry in a panic forcing Dumbledore to spend half of his time aiding in sorting out the mess Fudge had left behind and the other half at Hogwarts.

"Which is why I say Dumbledore should step back and let McGonagall take over," Remus said. "How can he be both the unofficial leader of the Wizarding World and Hogwarts Headmaster? He has to prioritize one and I am afraid Hogwarts' students are the ones paying the price."

"Yes, but the problem is that with Dumbledore at Hogwarts, Voldemort won't dare attack the students," Mrs. Potter said.

"I didn't say he should leave Hogwarts, just step back from his responsibility. No one needs to know that McGonagall is running everything," Remus explained.

"He does have a point mum, perception is everything. If people still think Dumbledore is there it doesn't really matter who is doing the actual running of the school," James agreed and Mrs. Potter nodded thoughtfully.

Everything seemed to operate out of habit. Classes took place, extracurricular activities went on as they normally would and mealtimes were as loud as ever. It was as normal as Hogwarts ever was so why did it feel so wrong?

The only reason Harry could think of was that life outside of Hogwarts was anything but normal at the moment. The entire wizarding world seemed to be in a state of panic. It didn't matter whether anyone believed Voldemort had returned or not. The vote of no confidence against Cornelius Fudge had proved that there were severe problems in the Ministry of Magic. Editorials were published on who should permanently replace Fudge daily. Thankfully Lucius Malfoy and the rest of the Death Eaters Harry had identified were not on the list.

"Well, that's understandable. How can people feel safe if the people responsible for keeping that safety are incompetent fools," Lily huffed. "Fudge was so worried about the people's reaction to the threat of Voldemort and how it would affect his image, but I think if he had been straight forward and had taken measures to ensure their safety they would have been a lot calmer than now when even if some people don't believe in the threat of Voldemort they think the Ministry can't handle *any* threat."

As April faded into May, all excitement concerning potential Ministers faded with the changing months. The D.A. had put a halt to their meetings so more focus could be put on the end of the year exams. Now, instead of practical defense lessons in the Room of Requirement, members of the D.A. had formed study groups for any other subject that was causing problems. Potions was the most popular group followed by Transfiguration but for completely different reasons. The Potions study group was a theoretical group so students could understand whatever Professor Snape didn't explain in class.

"Oh, so everything then!" Sirius nodded.

"Sirius!" Lily scolded.

"What?" Sirius cried defensively. "He doesn't explain anything!"

Transfiguration was a practical study group to help everyone along in the difficult transfigurations they had been attempting in class.

Quidditch practice was now every night to prepare for the final game of the season which was scheduled for the end of the month. Practices were early allowing Harry to still work on schoolwork and even have his Occlumency lessons but it was still exhausting. Professor Snape was increasing the intensity of the mental attacks which had a tendency to cause Harry's scar to sting more than normal but thankfully there were no dreams about the Department of Mysteries or visions of what Voldemort was doing. That was the last thing Harry needed at the moment.

Everything was extremely normal for Harry until one morning when he woke up early with a pounding headache that made his scar headaches seem like a minor annoyance. Opening his eyes was a major mistake. The room was entirely too bright and only made the pain worse. Any sort of thought whatsoever only made the pain worse. Every second seemed like an eternity and all Harry could do was to wait for it to pass.

"Someone call an Ambulance!" Lily cried.

"What?" Mrs. Potter asked.

Lily looked at her and shook her head, "Someone call a Healer!" she amended her cry.

Voices filled his ears only to be pushed aside by a soothing voice Harry had heard once before when he had been under the affects of the Dementors.

"Hold on, my son. The pain will pass."

Dad? Am...am I dying? How can I hear you?

"I'm here Harry!" James cried.

"No son, you're not dying. Be strong. Trust me. The pain won't last forever."

"How can you be talking to Harry, James?"

What's happening to me?

"I don't know," James answered desperately both Harry and Remus.

"I don't know, son. Try to focus on my voice and not the pain. Breathe Harry. Concentrate on the smaller things."

"Yes, Harry, breathe," James said breathing deeply to demonstrate.

Lily eyed him worriedly and bit her lip, "I don't like this one bit."

"I'm helping him!" James cried.

"How?" she asked.

"Dunno."

At a flash of warmth, Harry opened his eyes to see a flash of flame followed by the appearance of a familiar phoenix. The bird began singing softly, soothingly forcing Harry to relax. The pain started to decrease as Harry's eyes closed again. Everything seemed to fade away as Fawkes' powerful trilling washed over him, covering him like a blanket. He was falling into bliss, into peace. Nothing could harm him here.

"Good," Lily sighed relieved.

"Harry?"

The voice sounded so distant but so familiar. Where had he heard that voice before? "Dad?" Harry asked groggily as he tried to hold onto the peaceful darkness. He was too tired to make out who was trying to talk to him or what they wanted. *You were right, Dad. Thank you.*

"You're welcome," James sniffed and blew his nose on a napkin.

At the moment sleep seemed to be too impossible to ignore. He felt completely drained of all energy, barely noticing Fawkes vanishing in another flash of flames.

The next thing Harry knew he was being lowered onto something soft and covered with bedcovers. A cold, wet cloth was gently brushed against his face, especially under his nose. Another cold cloth was placed on his forehead causing Harry to shiver reflexively. Muffled voices filled his ears teasing him to fight the confusion in his mind. An arm burrowed underneath his shoulders and propped him at an angle so his head tilted backwards.

Without warning Harry's eye opened quickly, startling those who were near. Slowly, Harry's head raised until it was upright. He stared forward at nothing in particular but with an intensity that no teenager should have. "Danger has been brought to the forest," he said firmly. "Control it or remove it. It is your choice."

"Harry," Sirius said cautiously. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course he isn't!" Lily snapped.

"I'm just asking because he is making no sense whatsoever!" Sirius defended himself.

Several gasps were heard as Harry collapsed against his godfather's chest.

"Oh, Harry. You can collapse against my chest all you want. Don't worry!"

"I think Padfoot is the one felling unwell now," Remus stated dryly and Sirius glared at him.

All sense of urgency had vanished. Silence remained as Sirius wrapped his arms around Harry and held him close. No one knew what to say or what to do. It wasn't every day that a fifteen-year-old gave an ultimatum to the Hogwarts staff let alone one that the staff had to obey. There weren't many times Professor Dumbledore was caught off guard either but it was bound to happen sooner or later.

"It wasn't the Dark Lord, Headmaster. According to my sources, the Dark Lord nearly collapsed then shouted Potter's name. He wants to know exactly what happened. He could feel something powerful behind the pain. What should I tell him?"

"Well, that's good news at least," Mrs. Potter nodded with a grim frown.

"His sources hum?" Sirius said suspiciously.

"SIRIUS! Stop that! Again! SNAPE IS ON OUR SIDE!" Lily scolded saying the last sentence slowly. Sirius just shrugged.

"The truth, Severus. We don't know. Harry never remembers anything afterwards so we can't ask him. I have a suspicion but I hope I'm wrong.

"Care to share please!" James snapped.

I know Voldemort won't accept that answer for long but at the moment it will have to do. Voldemort is already too interested in Harry because of the magical outbursts. I fear that he may still be trying to persuade Harry to join him."

"As if he could," Mrs. Potter sniffed disdainfully.

"Do you really believe Potter would ever join the person who killed his parents?"

"Of course not!" Remus growled.

"I believe Harry would do anything to protect the ones he loves, even selling his soul if it were necessary. That is the type of person he is. Do I believe Harry would willingly join Voldemort to serve the darkness? No. Harry doesn't have it in him. I believe the reaction Harry had during your first Occlumency lesson is proof enough of that. You two clearly do not get along but that didn't stop him from panicking when he thought he had hurt you. Harry's been on the receiving end too many times to even think of hurting anyone."

"I hate to say this, but Dumbles is right," Sirius nodded grimly.

"You? Agreeing with that?" Lily asked. "I think the world went batty.

"Dumbles?" James raised an eyebrow.

"I think it's cute!" Sirius grinned and the others rolled their eyes and James groaned hiding his face in his hand.

Harry let out a groan as he rolled onto his right side, pulling his bedcovers tighter in the process. He was still tired but the voices of Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape wouldn't let him return to his slumber. A hand rested on his shoulder with a familiar grasp that Harry didn't have to open his eyes to see who it was. Everyone seemed to have their own way of waking him up. Sirius went for the hair, Remus usually rubbed the back, Tonks touched his face and Professor Dumbledore normally squeezed a shoulder.

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes to see an overabundance of white blocking his line of sight. He blinked the remaining tiredness out of his eyes as he sat up. "What time is it?" he asked sleepily.

"It is early afternoon, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said as he handed over Harry's glasses. "We were growing quite worried. How are you feeling, my boy?"

Harry slid his glasses on and took in his surroundings. He was in the hospital wing with Professor Dumbledore at his bedside and Professor Snape a few strides behind him. From the amount of sunlight in the room it was indeed early afternoon. He held back a groan that he was once again back in the hospital wing and returned his attention to Dumbledore. "I'm fine, sir," Harry said unable to hold back his confusion. "Er—what am I doing here?"

Professor Dumbledore let out a soft sigh. "When your roommates woke, you were bleeding from the nose and not responding, Harry," he said seriously. "They feared you were having another vision."

Harry stared straight ahead at a window that revealed a perfect view of the lake. He wished it had been a vision. At least then he would know what happened. "It wasn't Voldemort, sir," Harry said softly. "At least I don't think it was since my scar wasn't the source of the pain. I

can't remember much but I remember the pain. It reminded me of the outburst I had last year when I could hear Hogwarts speak but I didn't hear any voices this time...well, I don't remember hearing voices."

"Yes you did! You heard me!"

"And we still ask ourselves, how?" Remus asked worried.

"Very well, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said with a nod. "I wish I could give you the answers you want but at the moment I am just as confused by this entire situation as you are.

"No you're not; you have a theory and are not sharing! Start sharing!" Sirius snapped.

I will do what I can but I must admit that I have never seen anything like this before." At Harry's downcast look Dumbledore continued. "However that doesn't mean this has never happened. There is much in the wizarding world that not even I know."

Harry nodded slightly at the statement but remained silent. For some reason, that didn't make him feel better. It made him feel worse. Harry never expected Professor Dumbledore to know everything but was aware he knew quite a bit more than most. The fact that Dumbledore had never heard of anything like this happening before meant that once again something odd was happening to him.

"I will alert Poppy that you are awake, Harry," Professor Dumbledore continued after a moment of silence. "If you have any questions or concerns, you know where to find me." He gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze before turning away and walking out of the hospital wing with Professor Snape following him.

Madam Pomfrey appeared a short time later and was determined to run every sort of test imaginable before releasing Harry, at least that was what it felt like. Harry knew she was just being thorough but why did she have to be that way every single time he was in the hospital wing? Madam Pomfrey had backed off a little once Harry's heart had healed but Harry was

certain she was still more thorough with him than the other students at Hogwarts. *Most likely it's because I come in with the strangest injuries.*

"Nope, she is a tyrant with everyone!"

"James!"

"But Lily! She is!"

Once Harry was released it was nearly time for dinner which left him only enough time to hurry to the Gryffindor Tower to grab his wand and Firebolt for Quidditch practice. By the time he reached the Great Hall the tables were partially full. He took a long glance at the Gryffindor table but didn't see Ron or Hermione seated yet but then again neither were any of the other Gryffindor fifth years. Assuming that they were simply held up, Harry sat down across from Fred and George who stared at Harry in disbelief before grinning.

"Ah, I see someone is taking after Professor Black," George said thoughtfully. "Escaping from high security confinement." He winked discretely. "Don't worry, Harry. We won't turn you in."

"Of course it depends on the reward, my dear brother," Fred countered.

George stared at Fred in mock horror. "And betray the son of a Marauder?" he asked then leaned closer to Fred, not wanting anyone to overhear. "Worse, anger one of the actual Marauders? Do you have any idea what Professor Black would do to us? We would be at the receiving end of pranks for months!"

Sirius grinned gleefully and Remus glared at him. His grin just got wider.

Fred's eyes widened at the comment. "Good point," he said quickly then looked at Harry and smiled. "Your secret is safe with us, honorary brother. We swear to aid in your escape when the time shall come."

Harry enfolded his fingers as he rested his arms on the table. "Are you two finished?" he asked causing the twins to grin again. "I didn't escape. I was released. Do you really think Madam Pomfrey wouldn't hunt me down if I did escape? I doubt that Sirius and Remus could help me out of that fix." A smile slowly formed on Harry's face. "Although it is refreshing to hear that there is at least one teacher you two fear."

"See, I am *feared*," Sirius puffed his chest.

"Yes, a feared *teacher*," Mrs. Potter reminded him and Sirius eyes bugged and he fell backwards in a faint.

"Stop mock fainting Paddy!" Remus sighed. "That got old the first time around."

Fred and George glanced at each other before staring at Harry in mock offense. "Us?" asked George. "Afraid? Of Professor Black?"

"Honestly, Harry," added Fred. "Sometimes the things you think of—"

"—are just preposterous," finished George.

Fred leaned closer to Harry and winked. "If you mention that to anyone we may just have to retaliate," he said with a smile.

Harry raised his hands in the form of surrender. "Point taken," he said. "Now, what have I missed?"

Fred and George shrugged their shoulders. "Truthfully, it's been a rather slow day," said George. "The only bit of excitement was this morning when you wouldn't wake up. We could hear Ron screaming from our room. It wasn't a pretty picture. Fred tried to calm Ron down while the rest of your roommates ran for help. Professor Black and Remus were the first to arrive—"

“—they must have used some sort of secret passage,” Fred interrupted. “There is no possible way anyone could arrive that fast.”

“Of course we did,” Sirius said. “We know the castle better than the founders did- er- Moony? Why the glare?”

“Why is it *Professor* Black and I am just Remus?”

“Well, dear, Sirius is a teacher,” Mrs. Potter tried to explain but Remus just glared and crossed his arms with a scowl.

“So we’re back at the beginning. Like in the first book when Arthur Weasley got a Mr. and I just got a Lupin! I say that is discrimination!”

“Moony, I’m sure they don’t mean anything bad by it,” James tried.

“I want at least a Mr.!”

“Okay, from now on we will call you Mr. Lupin,” Lily said.

“Not from you!” Remus whined.

“They took one look at you, put you on a stretcher and hurried you out of the Tower,” George continued then looked at Harry in concern. “It wasn’t your scar, was it? You were bleeding—”

“—it wasn’t my scar,” Harry said firmly. “It was just a really bad headache that caused my nose to bleed but I’m fine now. Trust me. Madam Pomfrey ran every scan in the book.” He glanced at his watch. “We should get moving. We have practice soon.”

They quickly grabbed some food before standing up to leave only to come face to face with the fifth year Gryffindors who had just entered. Harry smiled as he grabbed a roll, tossed it to Ron the left with Fred and George. Ron had caught up with them a short time later, having grabbed a bit more food to hold him over until Quidditch practice was done.

Practice was more repetitious than anything. The Chasers practiced their plays against Ron while Fred and George were using one Bludger to try and keep Harry on his guard. After an hour and a half practice was called to a halt when the Ravenclaw team arrived for their practice time. As they left, Harry handed the Snitch over to Cho and nodded politely earning him a wink in return. *What is it with people and winking today?*

The Gryffindors returned to the Great Hall for the remainder of dinner before retreating to the Gryffindor Common Room for a night of schoolwork. The problem was everyone wanted to know what had happened to justify a day in the hospital wing. Apparently rumors had spread that Harry had been attacked in the middle of the night by something or someone sent by You-Know-Who or Fudge. Compared to that story the truth was quite disappointing and alarming. Hermione had been the first to voice her concerns about a headache that was severe enough to cause a nose to bleed but Harry insisted that it was nothing to worry about.

Whether Hermione believed him was another story. Harry could see the look of concern remained on her face even after the conversation had ended. He knew it had to come from Hermione being a muggleborn. She knew about muggle illnesses involving the brain and the dangers with them. After an hour of schoolwork, Harry couldn't take her periodic looks anymore. It was almost like she was afraid he was going to collapse any moment.

"I'm sure Madam Pomfrey took those illnesses into account when she scanned Harry," Lily said hopefully, "Didn't she?"

"Yeah, sure," James nodded unsure.

Letting out a sigh, Harry rested a hand over hers and leaned closer. "I'm fine, I swear," he whispered in her ear. "It's not what you're thinking."

Hermione looked at Harry, concern still on her face. "Are you sure?" she asked softly. "I don't want you to die, Harry."

Harry smiled at the blunt statement. "Well, I don't want to die either," he said frankly.
"Truthfully, Dumbledore doesn't know what happened but he's looking into it. If it was
something worth worrying about do you think Sirius and Remus would let me out of their
sight?"

"Nope," all five said at the same time.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "I guess you're right," she admitted. "If you're sure—"
Harry nodded "—then I believe you. But if it happens again—"

"—I give you the right to drag me to the hospital wing," Harry finished for her. "Deal?"

Hermione nodded and returned to her schoolwork with Harry following suit a moment later.
He had to admit that until Hermione had shown concern he had never thought of any sort of
muggle reason for what happened. The only problem was Dumbledore's explanation or lack
thereof. If it was some sort of muggle reason Dumbledore wouldn't have been as perplexed
as he was. No. This was something magical. Harry was sure of it.

.....

After a few days the hype over Harry's headache shifted to the upcoming Quidditch match.
Both teams wanted to win since they both had a chance at the Quidditch Cup. Gryffindor was
the favorite but the Gryffindor team knew better than to underestimate the Ravenclaw team.
With Harry's growth spurt, he was larger than Cho now which wasn't an advantage
considering how sunny the weather had been lately. He would have to take advantage of his
Firebolt's speed over Cho's Comet Two Sixty.

"Puft," James waved a hand dismissively. "Like she could take on a Potter! No one can!"

"You see Mrs. Potter, then he doesn't understand when I say he needs to deflate his head," Lily said casually.

"Unfortunately that comes from his father, I believe that is a Potter trend. I'm glad Harry takes after you," Mrs. Potter agreed and James cried outraged:

"Oi! I'm right here!"

The Common Room soon became an impossible place to study. Instead of using their time to prepare for the NEWTs, Fred and George decided it was more beneficial to once again begin testing products they had invented for their joke shop on the younger years which meant the library and the Room of Requirement soon became popular places for those who needed to finish their schoolwork. Ron and Hermione had tried to compromise with Fred and George but in the end it didn't make any difference because it was still a distraction to move to another location when the designated time arrived.

Members of the D.A. used the Room of Requirement since it could provide whatever they needed to complete their assignments. The room now resembled what could only be described as a mixture between a library and Common Room. There was a fireplace with comfortable chairs around it and cushions on the floor for students to read, there were rectangular tables with chairs for students to work on assignments and there were bookcases filled with books along the walls on every subject covered at Hogwarts. Any sort of talking was kept to whispers. Students left as quietly as they arrived, normally departing the room just before curfew.

Harry was normally the last to leave, especially on the nights he had Occlumency. It was rather difficult to concentrate on the order potion ingredients should be added to the Rejuvenation Draught without making it poisonous when you were mentally exhausted from pushing Professor Snape out of your head. Packing up his schoolwork, Harry figured it would probably be smart to leave that assignment until morning. He was about to stand when a hand on his shoulder made him jump in surprise.

Turning quickly, Harry instantly relaxed to see a concerned Cho Chang standing in front of him. "Harry, are you all right?" she asked as she sat down next to him. "You look like you were a world away just now."

Harry let out a sigh as he tiredly rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "I just have a lot on my mind," he said evasively. "OWLs and everything."

Cho leaned forward and stared at him sympathetically. "I remember," she said truthfully, "but I think there's something more going on with you. Ron and Hermione may be too busy to notice or too timid to say anything but I'm not. Harry, you look like you're on the verge of collapsing. You may not realize it but people do notice when there's something wrong with their friends."

"Finally!" Remus growled angry. "Someone notices!"

Harry looked at Cho before shaking his head. He should have known someone would eventually say something. He was just surprised that it was Cho and not Hermione or the Weasleys considering how protective the Weasleys had been since the Christmas holiday. "I'm fine, Cho," Harry insisted. "I honestly just have a lot on my plate at the moment. I appreciate the concern but it's nothing, really."

"I don't think so, Harry," Cho persisted as she pulled out her wand. "Now, are you going to tell me what's bothering you or will I have to resort to more drastic means?"

"Excuse me?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. "Since when do you threaten people? You're a Ravenclaw. Ravenclaws don't threaten especially by means of violence."

"I wouldn't say that," Sirius said rubbing a spot in his face.

"Bad memories Paddy?" James asked.

"Never, never ask two Ravenclaws out on the same day! They get *touchy*!"

"Speaking for all females Sirius," Lily said. "We *all* get touchy if you ask two of us out on the same day."

"Don't see why," Sirius shrugged.

"And that's why you get hexed," Remus explained.

It was Cho's turn to stare at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "Since when do you know so much about Ravenclaws?" she asked curiously. "Just because we don't go parading around like you Gryffindors doesn't mean we simply stay in our rooms and read all day long."

Harry's eyes narrowed. That was a low blow. "Gryffindors do *not* parade around," he said through his teeth. "I think you have us confused with a few Slytherins in my year."

Cho smirked as she leaned a little closer. "Is that so?" she asked. "Then how do you explain the fact that the Gryffindor House has the most biases towards other houses? You call the Ravenclaws bookworms, the Hufflepuffs pushovers and Slytherins...well I won't start with that." At Harry's hurtful look, Cho let out a sigh and changed tactics. "I'm just saying that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, Harry. There are very few of us who only have only one house in us."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered as his gaze fell to the floor. He didn't need to be reminded of the fact that the Sorting Hat nearly put him in Slytherin. "I really appreciate that you want to help, Cho, but there is just so much that no one can help me with. Everyone thinks of me as this person who can take on anything without flinching. I wish I could be that way, I really do."

Cho reached for his hands and held them in hers. "Harry, I can't speak for everyone else but I think that's because you don't let it show," she said gently. "Did you know that Ron and Hermione talked to the Council after the Christmas holidays, asking us to keep an eye on you during meetings?" Harry shook his head. "They were worried about you. I think a lot of people were; they just didn't know what to say or do. Susan told the Council that her aunt cornered her before the hearing and demanded to know what had been happening while Umbridge taught here. You hid everything then, Harry, and you're doing it again. No one will think any less of you if you let your frustrations show."

"Exactly!" Remus let his hands drop on his thighs.

"You know Moony, you could start taking your own advice," Sirius said.

"Don't follow."

"No you wouldn't," James grumbled.

Harry let out a sigh, keeping his gaze on the floor. He knew Cho had a point but he wasn't about to start ranting about matters he had been told not to talk about. "It's just not that simple, Cho," he said as he finally met her stare. "Maybe I don't want to burden people with worries that they would never understand. I wish I just had to worry about schoolwork and Quidditch. I wish I didn't have a Dark Lord plotting my death but I do and no amount of ranting will change that."

"Probably not but it will make you feel better," Cho countered as she sat back in her chair and released Harry's hands. She looked at Harry for a moment before shaking her head in frustration. "Please tell me you are at least talking to Professor Black and Mr. Lupin."

"After they pry everything out by sheer stubbornness," Mrs. Potter mumbled.

Harry nodded as a smile formed on his face. "Trust me," he said bluntly. "There are no secrets between me, Sirius and Remus. It's rather difficult to hide anything from them when they're both here to keep an eye on me."

Cho let out a giggle. "I suppose," she said then stood up. "I know I probably wouldn't understand what this year has been like for you, Harry, but I can sympathize." She took a step towards him and smiled. "Perhaps you just need a distraction from it all."

Before Harry could ask what she meant Cho had her hands on the sides of his face. She gently tilted his head upwards as she lowered her own. Their lips met. Harry inhaled sharply, his eyes wide with shock. Cho was kissing him! Cho Chang!

"Aw! Harry's first kiss!" Lily cooed.

"Kind of abrupt," Sirius pointed out.

"I didn't see that coming," Remus agreed.

"Hey, she kissed him. His first kiss should be initiated by him!" James complained.

"Why? So he could get slapped for kissing someone who didn't want to be kissed in the middle of the Great Hall," Lily raised an eyebrow.

"Confess Lily, you loved that kiss," James grinned cheekily.

"I don't think he understood the slap dear," Mrs. Potter chuckled at Lily's outraged look.

Yes, she was pretty but she was also his friend. *She was Cedric's girlfriend you git!* Panicking, Harry quickly turned his face as he pushed Cho away. He quickly stood and stared at Cho in disbelief, unable to think of anything to say.

Seeing his reaction, Cho covered her mouth as she started to laugh. "Oh Harry," she said when she regained control of herself. "You should see your face right now." She cleared her throat and grinned. "So, how are you feeling now?"

"Confused," Harry said honestly, unable to think of anything else. "Why did you do that?"

"The million galleon question," Sirius sighed.

"It took your mind off everything else, didn't it?" Cho asked. Harry nodded causing her to smile triumphantly. "Then my job is done but don't start thinking that this will be a regular thing every time you are stressed out."

Harry rolled his eyes at Cho's playful tone. He could tell that she was just trying to help out a friend, nothing more. That was a relief. He still had a problem at seeing her as anything other than Cedric's girlfriend and had a feeling she knew that. "Very funny," Harry said flatly. "You better be careful. One could think you were trying to seduce your opponent in hopes that you would have a chance at winning the final game of the season."

"I knew she had unworthy intentions. Harry watch out! She'll do that during the game!" James cried.

"Yeah, in the middle of the sky at high speed and all, just before he is right about to catch the snitch," Lily snorted.

"You joke, but it could happen," James said seriously and the other four in the room burst out laughing.

Cho glared at Harry as she enfolded her arms across her chest. "Like I need to seduce you to beat you in a game of Quidditch," she countered. "You have a rather high opinion of yourself, Potter. One would wonder how you're able to even fly with a head as big and heavy as yours."

"If his father can, why not him," Lily sighed.

Harry returned the glare for a moment before it melted into a smile. He had to admit, although he didn't really like the route Cho took, it had worked. She had taken his mind off of all of the unpleasantnesses in his life at the moment. "Thanks Cho," Harry said sincerely.

Cho smiled back. "No problem," she said before her face turned serious. "I know you have worries that the rest of us will probably never have, Harry. Just know that you're not as alone as you may feel. Everyone in the D.A., including Hermione and the Weasley siblings would help you if you asked them. I don't think any of them would mind if you ranted about what's on your mind. It's surely better than letting it fester."

Harry had to admit once again Cho had a point. Although he hadn't experienced any emotional outbursts lately, Harry was still fearful that it could happen again. His life had been fairly normal if you ignored the headache and the scenario with Firenze. That normalcy usually wasn't a good sign. It normally meant that the next outburst whether it was emotional or magical would be extremely powerful.

Cho grabbed her things and took a step towards the door before turning back to Harry. "I don't know what the future will bring but don't waste the present by worrying about it," she said sincerely. "If Cedric's death taught us anything it's that life is short and death is unexpected. We owe it to him to live life to the fullest."

"I know," Harry said as he grabbed his own schoolbag. "I guess it's easy to get overwhelmed with the small things and forget that in the grand scheme of things, whatever happens will happen."

Cho stared at Harry for a moment before nodding. "Why Harry, you almost sounded like a Ravenclaw for a moment," she said in approval as she walked towards the door with Harry at her side. "I'll have to tell my housemates that there's more to Harry Potter than what meets the eye. I'm sure they would love to meet the intellectual side of you."

Harry scowled at her as he opened the door and let her pass. "Don't you even think about it," he warned and followed her out of the Room of Requirement. "The last thing I need at the moment is a bunch of girls trying to distract me from beating you at Quidditch."

"Yes Harry! Focus on what is important!" James said firmly.

Cho looked at Harry innocently. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked as they walked towards the staircases.

"Oh, she is a devious one!" James said worried. "Be careful Harry!"

"You know what I mean," Harry said biting back a smile. "Don't try the innocent act, Cho. I know you too well. Blame it on working together for the D.A. for so long. When you set your mind to something, you do whatever is necessary to accomplish it." They reached the staircases. "I respect that but I'm the same way, remember that."

Cho nodded before bidding goodnight and hurrying to the Ravenclaw Tower. Once she was out of sight, Harry hurried to the Gryffindor Tower. Cho had certainly given him a lot to think about. He had pulled away from his friends this year because he believed they wouldn't be able to understand like Sirius and Remus. Maybe they wouldn't understand but they could

sympathize. Perhaps that was the first step he needed to take to repair the relationship he had between them that had been damaged by the misunderstandings and lies.

.....

Throughout the rest of May, Harry slowly began to confide more and more in Ron and Hermione. He finally revealed what happened during the hearing with Umbridge and reluctantly explained the vision he had that involved Mr. Weasley due to Ron's persistence. Both Ron and Hermione were shocked to learn that Harry had actually overpowered Voldemort's possession of Nagini. He also explained that he had been working on a way to keep Voldemort out of his head but he couldn't tell them any more because his teacher insisted on secrecy. This relieved Ron and Hermione greatly since they had been worried whether any more visions would be coming.

The final Quidditch game of the season finally arrived with the last weekend in May. Cho and Harry had become the focal points of the game with their playful taunts whenever they passed each other in the hallway. Harry would comment on Cho's lack of speed while Cho would vocalize wonders on Harry's capability of catching the Snitch since he had a tendency to attracting Bludgers. Their taunts shocked everyone at first, especially when Harry and Cho would end the confrontation with a smile. After a while everyone just accepted the banter and even found it amusing at how quickly Harry and Cho could think of appropriate comebacks.

As game time approached on the Saturday morning, the tension had increased dramatically. Both teams wanted to win. Gryffindor wanted to keep the Quidditch Cup while Ravenclaw wanted to finally win it. No one had to voice the fact that Ravenclaw would do everything in their power to win the game. This meant Fred and George would have to do everything in their power to keep the Bludgers away from Harry.

Angelina's pre-game speech was short and to the point. "Do your jobs and we'll win." There was nothing else to say and everyone knew it.

Walking onto the field, Harry blinked a few times so his eyes could adjust to the sunlight. It was a clear day, not a cloud in the sky and very little breeze. The Ravenclaw team was already waiting for them. Harry and Cho looked at each other for a moment before nodding, a silent understanding passing between them. They were no longer friends, only opponents. Catching the Snitch was all that mattered now.

"Snitch, snitch, snitch, snitch, snitch," James chanted.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch said and waited for them to do so. "Mount your brooms. Now, three...two...one..."

The moment the whistle sounded, Harry kicked off into the air with Cho following him. He immediately started looking for the Snitch. Cho placed herself in front of him with a few broomsticks worth of distance between them. From their posts, Harry and Cho knew that making the first sighting was the determining factor to who became the pursuer and the follower. Neither of them wanted to be the follower.

They didn't have to look for long. Looking to the right, Harry saw a flash of gold near the Hufflepuff stands and immediately took off with Cho right behind him. He was nearly there when the Snitch veered left towards the Ravenclaw goalposts. Harry followed suit, aware that Cho was right on his tail. He lowered his body, decreasing the wind resistance and putting more distance between him and Cho. Harry was nearly there, reaching out for the Snitch...reaching for a victory...

...when what could only be described as a forceful wave of wind hit him and Cho, sending them flying backwards and off their brooms. Screams filled the air and Harry and Cho started to fall. Harry knew he needed to act quickly. There was only fifty feet of air separating them from the ground. With a flick of the wrist, Harry had his wand in hand and pointed to the ground. Concentrating, Harry recalled the Transfiguration Sirius had taught him one day during his summer at Hogwarts. Sirius had been bored and wanted to have some fun. It could work...no, it had to work.

"What did you do Sirius?" Remus asked worried. "I hope it helps!"

The field underneath them slowly transformed from the green grass to a smooth black material and started to rise a couple meters. They were only twenty feet from hitting it.

"What is that?" Mrs. Potter asked.

"Oh, I know what it is!" Lily cried relieved. "That will work!"

"Care to explain how?" James asked worried.

Harry instantly re-holstered his wand as he grabbed a confused Cho. He rotated his body so that he was falling back first as he held Cho with one arm around her midsection and another around her shoulders. Ten feet...five feet...

The entire stadium was silent as Harry hit the black surface, still holding Cho tightly. The Seekers appeared to sink into the surface for a moment before they sprang back into the air. Harry looked upwards and released his hold on Cho's shoulders to grasp the extended hand of George Weasley. Cho instantly wrapped her arms around Harry, holding on tightly.

"Er, what happened?" Sirius asked bewildered.

"He turned the grass into a trampoline," Lily explained. "It's a sports equipment with a stretchy material that is used for bouncing. So they bounced instead of getting hurt. I obviously must have shown you one since Harry said you're the one that showed him."

"Well, you know, I have other sources of information," Sirius said defensively.

"Remus looks like he didn't know what a trampoline was either," she stated dryly.

"Hey! We don't always ask Moony stuff!" James cried.

"No, of course not," Lily said sarcastically.

"You always have to pull something, don't you?" George asked with a grin.

Harry smiled. Only the Weasley twins would crack jokes at a time like this. Fred arrived a moment later with Harry's Firebolt in hand while the Ravenclaw Captain had Cho's broom. Madam Hooch blew her whistle, calling for a timeout while the Seekers remounted their brooms. Both teams surrounded the Seekers to make sure they were all right. After insisting that he was all right, Harry glanced at the teacher's box to see an anxious Sirius and Remus. He mouthed an 'I'm fine' but didn't hide the slightly nervous look on his face. Whatever that had been, Harry doubted that any student could have created it. Sirius and Remus relaxed slightly but the three of them knew the subject was far from being closed.

After confirmation that Harry and Cho were all right, the game continued. Retaking their spots facing each other, their eyes met for a moment. Cho still looked a little shaken but she managed to smile at Harry and mouth a 'thank you'. Harry nodded and returned the smile. Their attention returned to searching for the Snitch. This time Cho saw it first and took off with Harry following her. They were flying towards the Gryffindor stands, Harry quickly caught up with Cho so they were flying side by side.

The Snitch quickly changed course, flying off to the right which gave Cho a small advantage for a moment. Harry quickly extinguished the lead and managed to pull ahead of her. The distance between them and the Snitch was decreasing quickly. Harry reached out just as the Snitch shot upwards. Harry let out a groan of annoyance as he followed. He shot up quickly, reaching out again and this time felt the small protesting golden ball in his hand.

Cheers broke out as Harry held up the captured Snitch. Madam Hooch blew her whistle signaling the end of the game. Everyone landed quickly on the recently un-transfigured field. The Gryffindor team rushed at Harry, congratulating him while the Ravenclaws held back obviously disappointed. Once everyone had scolded Harry for scaring them half to death, the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw teams congratulated each other for a game well played. The Gryffindors were awarded the Quidditch Cup and instantly retreated to the Gryffindor Tower for the party that was bound to last well into the night.

The five Gryffindors in the room were cheering loudly.

Well, all of the Gryffindors except Harry who hung back with Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore to discuss what happened. Once everyone left, Sirius seemed to be stuck between wanting to congratulate Harry and hide him away. Remus seemed to sum up everything rather well when he simply stated: "Well, at least you're not hurt this time. That has to count for something." Sirius didn't like that comment too much. Remus was trying to lighten the mood to hide his own nerves but the problem was Sirius didn't have a sense of humor when Harry's life was in danger even though everyone was aware of the fact that if Harry hadn't done something, someone else would have...but that was beside the point.

Sirius glared at Remus who shrugged.

Professor Dumbledore didn't appear to be as certain as Harry that whoever had caused the disturbance hadn't been a student. The problem was not much could be done about it unless someone came forward. The teachers could ask around whether anyone had any knowledge of the strange occurrence but the chances of someone admitting that they tried to injure two students were slim to none. With nothing else to discuss, Sirius and Remus walked Harry to the Gryffindor Tower, congratulating him on his fast thinking and a good catch. Harry tried to assure his guardians that he was fine but the one armed embraces from Sirius and the ruffling of the hair from Remus. It seemed that Sirius and Remus just needed time more than anything to deal with their chaotic emotions. Harry could relate.

Once Harry bid farewell to his guardians, he entered the Gryffindor Tower and was instantly bombarded with pats on the back and voices of congrats. All worries were pushed away for the moment. He wouldn't forget what happened but right now, he would enjoy the victory. Tomorrow he could worry and ask questions.

They heard a knock from the door and hastily hid the book taking out the "Lord of the rings". The door opened and Mr. Potter came in.

"Hello kids, having fun?"

"Yes, loads," Sirius answered.

"Honey," Mr. Potter said frowning. "What are you doing here?"

"Reading with them," Mrs. Potter answered without faltering. "They seemed to be having so much fun."

James was astonished at his mother's straight face.

"Okay," Mr. Potter said slowly. "But we should get ready don't you think?"

"Why?" she asked bewildered.

"Dinner with Helen and Richard."

"Do I have too?" she definitely whined and the four teenagers and Mr. Potter gaped at her.

"Yes," he said shocked. "You're the one that wanted this dinner date"

"Bur what about the kids? We can't leave them alone?" she tried to reason.

"They are sixteen and the house-elves are here. Besides James knows how to contact us."

James nodded but quickly stopped at his mother's glare.

"Fine," she got up and shooed Mr. Potter from the room. "Go get ready. I'll be there in a minute."

As she closed the door she glanced at the teens and said hopefully, "So, you kids can wait."

"NO!" they all cried out together.

"But you could," she said.

"With all due respect Mrs. P this is my son's future we're talking about," Lily said.

"You could tell dad and then he'll understand why you can't go."

"Are you crazy James? You're father is an Auror. He'll never approve of us learning the future like that.

He'll say something about meddling with time and how it's dangerous and illegal or some nonsense like that. Nope, it's best to keep Harold blissfully ignorant," she nodded to herself. "Well," she said grimly.

"I'll guess I'll have to go. But you four better tell me everything in the morning," she warned.

As she left the room Lily patted James, "I guess you can't help it. I mean, look at your genes."

A/N- Three weeks. Oh, my God, I am awfully sorry. But I had almost no time whatsoever. Truly did not.

I am late with "Life goes on" too.

Thanks for reading and reviewing.

.....

Not mine.

Chapter 26

OWLs

The arrival of June sent the fifth and seventh year students into a study frenzy. OWLs and NEWTs were right around the corner. For some reason the end of the year exams seemed so much closer now. Common Rooms were now fully devoted to studying. Even Fred and George had given up testing their products to concentrate on their upcoming tests. That didn't stop members of the D.A. from still using the Room of Requirement though. Many had grown accustomed to being able to have 'everything they needed' at their fingertips.

As expected, no progress had been made in figuring out who had knocked Harry and Cho off their brooms during the Quidditch match but that didn't stop Sirius and Remus from entering full research mode to find out what had exactly happened. Well, actually Remus spent most of the time researching then relaying what he found to Sirius since the Defense teacher had classes to worry about in addition to study sessions with Harry every night. Sirius was helping Harry with History of Magic, Transfiguration and Charms while Remus covered Herbology, Astronomy, Potions, and Care of Magical Creatures. Divination was a lost cause so they didn't even bother with that subject.

Classes were now completely devoted to reviewing material that would be covered on the exams. Harry would write down everything mentioned in class before taking it to Sirius and Remus who would help him sort out his messy notes. He wasn't cheating. Harry refused to cheat. He wanted to do well on his exams on his own. Rearranging the notes helped Harry remember the material easier since they were now grouped according to what the material regarded. If Harry had a question on something, he asked but he never asked if it was on the actual test or not. He respected his guardians too much to even consider asking that.

"They wouldn't be able to tell anyway since the teachers have nothing to do with the OWL exams," Lily said.

"Good thing too, this way Harry actually has a chance of passing Potions," James growled. "And don't defend him Lily! You yourself have pointed out what a lousy teacher he is."

"One thing is to point that out when the book is talking about that, another completely different is to use every opportunity to point that out," Lily huffed.

"In other words," Remus whispered to Sirius. "She can but we can't."

Sirius nodded seriously and when Lily narrowed her eyes at him he threw her a cheeky smile.

Occlumency was put on hold for the time being although Professor Snape instructed Harry to continue practicing every night. "No doubt the intensity of the OWLs will leave someone like you mentally exhausted, Potter," Snape had said. "That is exactly the opportunity the Dark Lord would take advantage of. Merlin forbid our precious celebrity miss his exams because he was too daft to protect himself."

James pointed at the book frantically but Lily just ignored him stoically. None of the boys noticed how she had been shredding a napkin in her hand and how her green eyes promised some very much deserved retribution to one Severus Snape for insulting her baby! *But there was no need for James to know that*, she thought.

It was during the final Transfiguration class before the exams that the students were handed their timetables with details of the procedure for the OWL exams. Tests would be spread over two weeks. Theory would be covered in the morning while practical was in the afternoon except for practical Astronomy which would be covered at night. Precautionary measures were taken to prevent cheating. Examinations were covered with anti-cheating charms, Auto-Answer Quills, Remembralls, Detachable Cribbing Cuffs and Self-Correcting Ink were banned from the examination hall. Results would be sent by owl in July leaving everyone in suspense for weeks.

Charms Theory ended up being scheduled first thing Monday morning. The weekend before the tests everyone was frantically reviewing five years worth of information. The Gryffindors had learned early to avoid Hermione at all costs since she was determined to answer everything word by word as it appeared in the book. Harry had discovered quickly that

Occlumency actually had some benefits. It was easier for him retain information than it had been in the past along with keeping information straight. It almost made those grueling hours with Professor Snape worth it. *Almost.*

Monday morning arrived too soon for a lot of fifth years. After an agonizingly slow breakfast, they had to wait outside the Great hall until half past nine. The four long tables had been removed and replaced with many tables that were facing the staff-table at the end of the Hall where Professor McGonagall was waiting. Everyone took a seat and slowly silenced. "You may begin," Professor McGonagall announced as she turned over an enormous hour-glass on the desk next to her that also had spare quills, ink bottles and rolls of parchment.

"You know, considering we just went through that torture, there was no need to describe it in so many details and give us flashbacks," Sirius said a looking sick.

Lily looked at him and then whispered to James, "Did he do badly?"

"No," James huffed. "He was the one that studied the least and the git almost got the best marks.

Moony barely beat him and let's face it, Moony sleeps with books attached to him."

"Excuse me, you do know I can hear you?" Remus said annoyed.

"That was a compliment Moony," James whined.

Harry turned over his paper as he inhaled deeply, forcing himself to remain calm. Getting worked up would only cause him to make stupid mistakes. He read the first question: *a) Give the incantation and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly.* He grinned as started to write.

Two hours later the Great Hall had been reverted back to an eating area for lunch. Hermione was reviewing the exam paper checking and rechecking how many errors she had made. After listening to her for almost twenty minutes, Harry pulled out his wand and cast a silencing charm. Hermione glared at Harry while everyone around them cheered. It appeared that he wasn't the only person she was annoying.

"Why didn't we think of that?" Sirius cried and glared at Remus.

"Oh, so now I'm evil for wanting to make sure you know everything and do well! Humph, see if I help you again!"

"Moony, the threat loses power if you constantly make it and never follow through," James said, Remus glared and Lily chuckled.

Once lunch was over the fifth years once again waited outside the Great Hall for their practical exam. Students were called in alphabetical order which made Ron groan in annoyance. Waiting students could be heard muttering incantations and practicing wand movements. Needing to block out all of the noise, Harry knelt down and sat on his heels as he focused completely on his breathing and calming techniques, closing his eyes to prevent any distractions whatsoever. He had done everything he could to prepare. All he could do now was pray that it had been enough.

Before Harry knew it a hand rested on his shoulder snapping him out of his calm. Opening his eyes, Harry looked up to see Ron looking at him in concern. "Flitwick's calling your name, Harry," he said softly. "You all right?"

Harry nodded as he stood up and followed the Patil twins into the Great Hall. With a flick on the wrist he had his wand in hand. He fought to keep his breathing steady as he reached Professor Flitwick.

"Professor Tofty is free, Harry," Flitwick squeaked as he pointed at what appeared to be the oldest and baldest examiner sitting behind a small table in the far corner.

Harry had to suppress a groan at seeing that Draco Malfoy was already being tested nearby by a tiny, stooped witch with a face so lined it almost looked like it was covered with cobwebs. He approached the table, instantly burying his nerves that tightened his stomach with every step. It was one thing to believe you had prepared yourself as much as you could but it was completely different to prove it. *Calm down! Remember what you've been taught! Only with a level head can you avoid making stupid mistakes.*

The elder Professor glanced up at Harry before returning his gaze to his pince-nez for a brief moment almost like he was double checking his information. "Potter, correct?" Professor Tofty asked. "The famous Potter?"

Harry suppressed an annoyed groan. "I'm the only Potter there is, sir," he said politely.

Professor Tofty let out a laugh. "You sure are," he said. "Now, could you please take this egg cup and make it do some cartwheels for me?"

"I got Tofty too!" James cried delighted. "Apparently he hasn't got much imagination! That's exactly what he had me do!"

"Maybe that's why he asked Harry," Lily said.

"I highly doubt that Professor Tofty would remember what he had one student do on their OWLs just because after years after that exam his son became famous. They probably have standardized tests and by chance Harry was asked to do the same as James. Which depending on the number of tests they devised is actually quite easy to happen," Remus said wisely. "Especially since I was asked to do the same by someone else, and I know Pe- I mean, well, er- him was too," Remus finished lamely and the other three nodded seriously. It was hard to stop talking about someone that had been such a huge part of their life, which made the betrayal hurt even more because they couldn't just turn off the part of them that had cared for Peter.

Afterwards, Harry had to admit he had done his best. He had even managed to impress his examiner when he asked for clarification for types of Protection Charms and Shielding Charms. That prompted a discussion between Harry and the examiner about Harry's knowledge of material that was considered NEWT level. Harry was completely truthful, admitting that he felt he needed to be able to defend himself with the current state of things. Professor Tofty was continuously taking notes while they talked, prodding Harry for more and more information. By the time Harry was dismissed, he noticed that the final students were taking their exams. *Oops*. Harry couldn't believe he had lost track of time that badly during an exam.

Everyone had spent the night similar to the night before the Charms exam, cramming as much information as humanly possible in their brains. The following day was the Transfiguration

exams. The written exam had been difficult but in all honesty it could have been worse. Harry was pretty sure he remembered everything but you never really know. The practical exam had been tiring but like the written, Harry was fairly sure he didn't make any significant mistakes.

Wednesday brought the Herbology exam which could be considered easy when compared to the Transfiguration exam. Thursday brought the exam that many were almost excited about: Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry had no problems with the written and was surprised to find himself paired with Professor Tofty again for the practical. It seemed that Harry's reputation had passed to the examiners because like Charms, he was questioned extensively on topics that Harry knew weren't on the OWLs.

"Well, that should be all, Potter," Professor Tofty said with a smile then leaned forward a little bit. "Unless...I heard that you have a rather unique Patronus. How about for a bonus point?"

Harry shrugged as he raised his wand and instantly pictured spending the summer with Sirius, Remus and Tonks at Black Manor. "*Expecto patronum!*" he shouted. Everyone instantly stopped what they were doing to see a silver stag jump out of the end of Harry's wand followed by a silver wolf and a large silver dog. Professor Tofty stared in disbelief at the three figures as the Midnight and the Moony sat down at Harry's side while Prongs remained in front of Harry. "Er—you'll have to excuse them. They are rather protective."

"N...no problem," Professor Tofty stuttered still unable to take his eyes off of the Patronuses.

Harry bit back a laugh at his examiner's face. *Well, he asked to see them.* "Prongs, Moony, Midnight, why don't you three go have some fun?" he offered then watched as they ran out of the Great Hall with Prongs leading the way causing several people to cry out in surprise. Harry then looked back at Professor Tofty who had finally recovered from his shock. "Anything else, sir?"

"Ah, good to know we still make a good impression on the examiners," Sirius said fondly.

"Saying that you misunderstood the examiner when he asked you to turn the egg green and turn Snape's hair green instead Sirius isn't a good impression!" Remus scolded.

Sirius smiled wistfully, "Snape shouldn't have been that angry, after all, he was showing his Slytherin pride."

Professor Tofty smiled, still slightly shocked as he started to write down notes. "Not at all, Potter," he said. "You may go."

Friday brought a well needed day off for Harry and Ron while Hermione had her Ancient Runes exam. They relaxed for the morning even managing to play a game of wizard chess then, with Harry's urging, slowly started reviewing for the Potions exams that would be held on Monday. They were just starting on third year material when Hermione entered the Gryffindor Tower looking completely outraged.

"How were the Runes?" Ron asked tentatively.

"I can't believe I was so stupid!" Hermione cried in frustration. "I mistranslated ehwaz. It means partnership, not defence, I mixed it up with eihwaz."

"It's only one mistake," Ron offered.

"Oh, shut up!" Hermione said angrily. "One mistake could make the difference between passing and failing!"

"Does that remind you of someone Prongs?" Sirius said ruffling Remus' hair fondly.

"Sure does," James grinned and looked at Lily.

Remus and Lily tried to ignore them the best they could.

"That's true," Harry offered calmly, "but getting all worked up about it isn't going to change anything now. Whatever grade you receive, you'll receive. I'm sure you did fine, Hermione. Focus on what you did correctly, not what you did wrong. Concentrating on the negative will only make you more frustrated and we have another week of exams to go. If you want to join us, we're currently covering Potions. If you need some time to cool down, that's okay too."

Harry then returned to his notes, nudging Ron to do the same.

Hermione let out a huff as she collapsed in a chair next to Harry. She didn't contribute much to the study session although it was obvious that she was listening to their quiet quizzing of various potions. When Ron grew frustrated of that they simply read through notes and text books. The intense studying continued throughout the weekend for all of the fifth years. Everyone was nervous about the Potions exam probably more so than any other because Professor Snape didn't really explain anything let alone in the detail that would most likely be on the exam.

"Does that constitute talking about the subject? Can we comment now?" Sirius asked.

"Okay," Lily conceded.

"Snape is a git!" Sirius cried.

"Greasy haired bastard," James added.

"That's not commenting on his teaching abilities!" Lily said exasperated.

"Well," Remus said slowly. "Indirectly, it is."

When the exam finally arrived, many students were so worried that they couldn't even think straight. The main problem was that so many professions required a NEWT in Potions (especially the three that Professor McGonagall had proposed to Harry). The written portion had been difficult although Harry had to hide a grin when he saw a question regarding the Polyjuice Potion's effects. He was fairly sure he answered that question correctly. The practical exam actually hadn't been that bad. Without Professor Snape present the entire atmosphere seemed to change dramatically. Everyone was much more relaxed, particularly Neville.

When the exam finished, everyone filled a flask that already had their name on it with their sample and corked it. All Harry could do now was hope that it had been enough and if it hadn't, he'd figure out something then. *Focus on what you can control.* Harry had been surprised to how much all of his mental training had been helping through his exams but he was grateful for it.

"Only four exams left," Parvati said tiredly as they walked back to the Gryffindor Tower.

"Only!?!!" Hermione snapped. "I still have Arithmancy and it's the toughest subject there is!"

Harry quickly intervened. "Parvati didn't mean anything by it, Hermione, but that's still no reason to bite her head off," he said as calmly as he could. "We're all stressed here but do you see any of us taking it out on those around us?" Hermione glared angrily at Harry as she opened her mouth to speak. "No, Hermione," Harry quickly said before she could say anything. "This pressure you put on yourself is insane. No one can score perfectly on everything. You're human. You *will* make mistakes."

"Harry's got a point, Hermione" Ron added softly.

Hermione was nearly shaking in anger. Perhaps that hadn't been the smartest thing to say at the moment. "Fine!" she shouted and stalked off.

The moment she was out of sight everyone turned to Harry and smiled compassionately. "It needed to be said, mate," Dean said frankly. "She's really been driving us nutter with it all. Merlin forbid she score anything other than an 'O'."

Harry just shrugged. "I can understand her wanting to do well," he said as they continued walking towards the Gryffindor Tower. "But the way she's acting now is borderline obsessive."

Ron stared at Harry as if he had grown another head. "Hermione's always been like that, mate," he said earning nods of confirmation from the rest of the group. "Where have you been for the past five years?" Everyone broke out in laughs.

Hermione didn't speak to anyone for the remainder of the day but it was obvious that some of what Harry had said had to heart. She no longer took her frustrations out on everyone around her but she was still working as hard as ever in order to remember everything as it had appeared in the book. Everyone just let her be. Rome wasn't built in a day and it was evident that changing Hermione Granger's beliefs was going to be just as difficult.

Care of Magical Creatures was scheduled for Tuesday. To say that the practical exam was odd would be an understatement. Harry correctly identified the Knarl that was hidden among a dozen hedgehogs but the oddity was that Knarls (normally highly suspicious creatures, generally going berserk at what they believed was an attempt to poison them) actually approached Harry and acted like they were best friends. The oddities didn't end there. Once again, Harry had no problem handling the Bowtruckle who seemed eager to stay with Harry throughout the rest of the exam by sitting on his shoulder. Harry also managed to feed and clean out a Fire Crab with no problems whatsoever.

To say that the examiner (a plump little witch this time) was surprised was an understatement. She was furiously taking notes long after Harry had said goodbye to the Bowtruckle by leaving it where he got it. Harry was finally dismissed by another examiner after waiting for nearly five minutes in silence. As he walked away, he could still hear his examiner's quill striking against the parchment.

Remus bit his lips and rushed to Lily's side and whispered in her ear so no one else would hear. Lily nodded and sad:

"I agree...uhu...I know...makes sense...in denial."

"Excuse me," Sirius said annoyed. "No secrets!"

Remus looked at him and rushed to his side and whispered frantically into his ear and Sirius' words where the same as Lily's.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to just tell everyone at once," James huffed.

"No," Lily said. "Because you wouldn't want to hear Remus' theory of why the magical creatures acted that way."

"Why?" James asked. "Why did they?"

"Well, you see, empaths don't just feel what others feel they sometimes project and this way the Knarl and Bowtruckle knew Harry meant no--"

"HARRY IS NOT AN EMPATH!" James yelled.

"Told you so?" Remus shook his head sighing.

Astronomy was held on Wednesday and was one of the easier exams. Remus had relayed several shortcuts for remembering tedious information about moons and rotation cycles which had helped immensely. With the practical exam scheduled for the evening, Harry had to face his Divination exam in the afternoon. He had nearly given his examiner who was the Professor who had examined Malfoy for Charms (Professor Marchbanks) a heart attack when he mentioned that he saw a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth in the crystal ball. The tea-leaf reading wasn't as traumatic. According to the soggy mush, Professor Marchbanks would have to make a decision in the near future regarding an opportunity. The palm reading only confirmed the tea-leaf reading which seemed to calm the short examiner down.

To say that Harry was relieved that exam was over was an understatement. He had no idea whether he passed or not but he honestly could care less. Divination was probably the one class he was eager to drop. It wasn't need for any sort of profession Harry could ever possibly want.

"Well, we were bound to fail that one," Ron said with a shrug as he caught up with Harry.

Harry grinned at the comment. "Is it bad that I really don't care?" he asked.

Ron shook his head. "After hearing about your untimely death for over two years I'm glad to leave it behind," he said with all seriousness.

Harry was about to voice his agreement when Hermione came running towards them. "Arithmancy is done!" she exclaimed. "You were right, Harry. I was putting too much pressure on myself to be perfect. Once I stopped worrying about answering everything correctly it was so much easier."

"And that is why Sirius did better than the others. He didn't get stressed out!" Lily exclaimed.

"Nope, I didn't. Not about the exams. What I hated was everyone nagging about them! That was torture!" he moaned.

Ron's eyes widened in shock. "Am I hearing this correctly?" he asked. "Harry was right and you were wrong?" Harry bit back a laugh while Hermione glared at Ron. "Merlin, I must be dreaming." Ron turned to Harry and grabbed his robes. "Please tell me I'm not dreaming! I don't think I could take another Divination exam!"

"No Ron, you aren't and we have it in Black and White, recorded on paper!" James cried delighted.

"The others books disappeared after we read them," Remus pointed out.

"Bugger!" James cried.

Harry smacked Ron on the back of the head. "Nope," he said confidently as Ron cried out in pain. "You're not dreaming. Come on, we need to look over our star-charts before dinner."

The Astronomy practical exam was held at eleven o'clock that night. Reaching the top of the Astronomy Tower, Harry noticed the windless and cloudless sky. No one would be able to blame their scores on the weather tonight. The half moon provided enough light but not too much so the stars couldn't be seen perfectly. Everyone set up their telescope and waited until Professor Marchbanks gave the word before they began filling in the blank star-chart they had been given.

Professors Marchbanks and Tofty walked among them, watching as they entered the exact positions of the stars and planets that they were observing. No one said a word. All that could be heard was the rustle of parchment, the scribbling of quills and the periodic creak of a telescope being moved on its stand. Time passed slowly. Harry finished his star-chart with twenty minutes left in the exam allowing him to double check the majority of his work before Professor Tofty called for everyone to set their quills down. After handing in his star-chart, Harry followed Ron and Hermione to the Gryffindor Tower for some much needed sleep. It had been an extremely long day.

The final OWL exam for Harry was History of Magic, scheduled for the afternoon. This allowed Harry to do a final revision of his notes in the morning along with the rest of the fifth years. Two o'clock came too soon and for the final time, the fifth years entered the Great Hall and sat down in front of their face-down examination papers. From the looks on the faces of everyone around him, Harry could tell that many just wanted the exam over with.

"Turn over your papers," Professor Marchbanks said from the front of the hall as she turned over the giant hour-glass. "You may begin."

The test was long and boring. Half-way through Harry's wrist was aching from writing so much but he continued on. This was one test that one couldn't dwell too much on one question or on anything other than the exam. It was amazing how many of the questions hadn't been covered in class. Harry was certain he would have to skip quite a few of them if he hadn't been tutored by Sirius and Remus. *I'll have to thank them later.*

"Yeah, well. We would have had too if Moony hadn't thought that what Binns taught wasn't enough," James huffed.

"You are welcome James," Remus chuckled. "You too Harry."

Luckily Harry had just finished the final question as Professor Marchbanks ordered everyone to put their quills down. After handing in his exam, Harry could only let out a sigh of relief as what felt like a large weight lifted from his shoulders. He had survived the OWLs and from the smiles on everyone else's faces they felt the same way, except for Hermione. She still looked

slightly nervous but chances were that she was mentally rechecking to ensure she hadn't made too many mistakes.

There was no celebration once all of the fifth years returned to their Common Rooms. Everyone was too exhausted to do anything other than lazing around. The two weeks of stress and tiring tests were over for the Gryffindors, allowing them to finally feel it since that they really had nothing to focus on. Ron and Dean ended up playing a game of chess but other than that nothing was really done before everyone dragged themselves to dinner.

Glancing up at the Head Table, Harry could see Sirius and Remus talking quietly to each other. From the looks on their faces Harry concluded that the topic wasn't a serious one and that Sirius was currently losing the debate, something that he hated.

"That's true," James chuckled. "Padfoot hate's being wrong," he finished pinching Sirius' cheeks and his hands were swatted away and he received an evil glare.

Sirius had a scowl on his face while Remus had a smirk.

"Gloating is rude Moony!" Sirius huffed.

"Yest, so much fun," Remus said in a singsong voice.

That usually meant that there would be a prank war later tonight. Harry couldn't help but smile as he returned his attention to his friends. Some things would never change.

After dinner Harry decided to take a chance and visit Sirius and Remus. He cautiously entered Marauder Quarters and wasn't surprised to see a flash of light narrowly miss him. His instincts instantly took over as Harry went for cover behind the sofa. Peeking over it, Harry rolled his eyes as he saw the state his guardians were in. Sirius looked like he had splotches of paint all over him and his hair was bright green. Remus was dressed in black robes that looked nearly identical to Professor Snape's and had long black hair in braids other than his normal graying light brown hair. *Now that is disturbing.*

Harry armed himself and quickly sent a disarming charm at Sirius then another at Remus. Both of their wands went flying as they turned in surprise to see Harry had entered. "Would someone care to explain?" Harry asked as he stood. Sirius and Remus glared at each alerting Harry that the 'discussion' wasn't finished yet. Chances were it would be at least an hour before they moved passed this argument. A few *Finite Incantatem*s later, Sirius and Remus were thankfully back to their original appearances. "You know what? I really don't want to know. I just wanted to stop by and thank you two for all of your help." Harry holstered his wand and moved toward the door. "I see you two later."

"He should have added a 'children' after that phrase," Lily chuckled and Remus glared at her. Sirius, the mature one, stuck his tongue out.

"Harry, wait," Sirius said instantly. Harry looked over his shoulder at his godfather. "It was a petty argument that got out of hand, nothing more. You just caught us by surprise, that's all."

Harry turned around, his gaze shifting between Sirius and Remus. "Are you sure?" he asked cautiously.

"Of course," Remus said with a smile. "You know us. We're both too stubborn for our own good." Remus approached Harry and motioned for him to sit down on the sofa. "So how does it feel to be finished with your OWLs? I must say I'm surprised there haven't been any celebrations yet."

Harry sat down with Sirius and Remus quickly joining him. "Everyone's too tired to celebrate," he said with a shrug. "I think having History today was what did it. That was the most tedious exam I've ever seen." Sirius and Remus shared a grin at the comment. "I would have been completely lost if I had just relied on what Professor Binns taught us in class."

Sirius let out a snort as he wrapped an arm around Harry. "At least one good thing came out of my mother forcing me to read those horrid history books when I was younger," he said. "Binns is too obsessed with the Goblin Wars for my tastes. I'm surprised the Ministry is still allowing him to teach."

"And because Sirius just happened to comment that he had learned more History from his mother than from Binns, Moony decided to go on research mode and pound our heads with it," James moaned.

"Once again James, you're welcome," Remus said through chuckles.

"What can they do about it, Padfoot?" Remus countered. "He's a ghost. It's not like they can physically remove him from the castle."

"Where there's a will there's a way," Sirius said stubbornly as he ruffled Harry's messy hair.

"So how have you been feeling, kiddo? Any headaches lately?"

Harry shook his head. **"Things have actually been quiet on both fronts," he said truthfully referring to both types of headaches he had fallen victim to. "I haven't even felt any of Voldemort's emotions." Harry was silent for a moment as he thought about what he just said. The fact that he hadn't felt anything from Voldemort lately came with a mixed response. He was grateful that he wasn't actually feeling the curses and the visions but on the downside he didn't know anything. Harry seriously doubted that Voldemort was simply sitting somewhere twiddling his thumbs. "Have you heard anything?"**

"Not likely," Sirius said grimly.

"Actually?" asked Remus. "No. We heard from Tonks that the Death Eaters named in your article have surprisingly been out of reach for questioning. There have been no attempts to break into the Department of Mysteries for the past four months. One would think Voldemort's given up on trying to obtain the Prophecy but Dumbledore doesn't believe it."

"Why don't we just destroy it?" Harry asked. "If the temptation was removed then we would have nothing to worry about."

"The only way to do that, Harry, would be to be granted special permissions by the Department of Mysteries and take you there," Sirius said bitterly. "That is something that we just can't risk at the moment. Voldemort has spies everywhere. From what we hear, he still

hasn't gotten over his obsession with you." Sirius pulled Harry closer. "Right now the only way he can hear the Prophecy is to physically be at the Ministry."

"And no way we're doing *that*!" Sirius said seriously.

"Good," James nodded.

Harry let out a sigh as he relaxed against Sirius' shoulder. He didn't like it but he trusted Sirius and Remus to make the right decision. Did Harry want to know what all the fuss was about? To a degree. He really didn't know if he actually believed in prophecies yet. The fact that Sirius and Remus believed in it made Harry nervous. Neither of his guardians were the type of people to believe in Divination yet they believed this prediction was authentic. They believed he had a destiny.

"Or, we believe Voldemort believes in the prophecy so much that he will make sure it's fulfilled," Remus frowned.

"You all right there, cub?" Remus asked gently.

Harry nodded as his eyes closed. He wasn't about to bother Sirius and Remus with his worries. They had enough on their minds as it was. "Just thinking," he said quietly.

"Maybe you should call it a night," Sirius proposed. "It's been a long two weeks for you."

Harry nodded again as he pulled himself to his feet. He took a few steps before he turned and faced his guardians. "Thanks again for all your help," he said sincerely. "I don't know what I would have done without it."

Sirius and Remus smiled. "You did most of the work, Harry," Remus said truthfully as he stood up. "We just gave you a nudge in the right direction. Do you want one of us to walk you back to the Gryffindor Tower?"

Harry shook his head. "I'll be fine," he said. "It's not that far." Harry started to turn but hesitated before looking back at Sirius and Remus. "You two will behave, right? I won't come here in the morning and find Remus looking like a female Snape again, will I?"

Sirius grinned mischievously. "Only if ol' Moony behaves, Pronglet," he said causing Remus to roll his eyes and shake his head slowly.

Harry bid goodnight to his guardians and left. He had a feeling that another prank war was about to start and truthfully didn't want to be anywhere near the Marauder Quarters for it. Remus hated being called old, especially by Sirius. Of course Sirius hated to be called Rita Skeeter's boyfriend so it all worked out. Harry reflexively shuddered at the thought of Sirius being in a relationship with Rita Skeeter. *Some things are just wrong.*

James grinned evilly and Sirius narrowed his eyes, "Don't James!"

"But Padfoot," James whined. "Why shouldn't I rejoice in your love life?"

"She is not part of my love life!" Sirius cried.

The hallways were completely empty. Glancing at his watch, Harry realized why. It was nearly curfew. He picked up his pace. The last thing he needed was to be caught by Professor Snape and lose points for Gryffindor or worse receive a detention. Gryffindor was currently in the lead for the House Cup but Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff weren't too far behind. He doubted Professor Snape would take fifty-five points away from Gryffindor for being out after curfew but with Snape you never knew.

Harry was nearly at the staircases when he suddenly felt a chill. He looked over his shoulder only to see darkness. After seeing no movement whatsoever, Harry continued on his way but he kept his body on alert. He only managed a few steps before he was hit by a forceful wave of wind like he had at the Quidditch game, sending him backwards into the wall. Harry's back and head hit the wall hard, sending pain up and down his spine and throughout the rest of his back. His head throbbed as he fell face first to the floor.

"What?" Lily shrieked. "HELP!"

Footsteps filled his ears. Harry tried to push away the confusion that flooded his mind as he slowly turned his head to see someone standing right in front of him wearing a dark cloak. He attempted to lift his head to see the face of his attacker when something sharp pierced his neck. Drowsiness suddenly overwhelmed his senses. Harry was helpless as he slowly blacked out and knew no more.

"SOMEONE IS KIDNAPPING MY SON! DO SOMETHING!" James yelled shaking Remus.

"WE WILL!" Remus yelled back and looked at Sirius desperately hoping he was right. Sirius shakily turned the page.

A/N- Wow, will you look at that. An update in one week, almost. I did it! Hooray! I am so happy! Now, if only I manage this again...sighs wistfully.

Thanks for reading and reviewing.

.....

Chapter 27

Department of Mysteries

"That's where the prophecy is," Sirius said frightfully.

"No, really? Any other obvious remarks Padfoot?" James snapped at him.

"I am just pointing something out!" Sirius growled.

"What Padfoot means is that this is not good and only one person might be interested in taking Harry to the Department of Mysteries," Remus said trying to calm down everybody's flailed nerves.

Muffled voices filled his ears. His back was aching along with his head. A cool breeze washed over him, pulling him out of the darkness that had taken him forcefully what only felt like a moment ago. He was lying on his right side on a cold and hard surface. There was mustiness in the air that Harry had never felt before. There was also a distinct odor to the air that

reminded Harry of the attic at Black Manor. It was certainly nothing he had ever smelt at Hogwarts.

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes and blinked in confusion. Everything felt incredibly hazy for some reason. Through his askew glasses, he saw towering shelves that held small, dusty glass orbs. The orbs gleamed slightly in the light coming from the candles set in intervals along the shelves. Strangely, the flames were burning blue but that was the last of Harry's concerns at the moment. He tried to push his remaining grogginess aside as he straightened his glasses and attempted to sit up.

"NO!" all four cried.

"NOT UNTIL YOU KNOW WHO IS THERE!" Lily yelled desperately.

That was a mistake.

Harry's head pounded and his back screamed at the sudden movement. Carefully, Harry rolled onto his back, ignoring the sparks of pain that came from putting pressure on his injured back. Voices grew louder, signaling that people were approaching. He had to think of something quickly. He was in no condition to duel at the moment. He also had no idea where he was which gave him a severe disadvantage. He certainly wasn't at Hogwarts which left only a handful of possibilities.

"Play dead Harry. Don't let them know you're awake," James instructed.

With really no other choice, Harry knew he would have to play along for now. Hopefully he would be able to think of something soon although he had a really bad feeling that he wasn't going to like the answers to the questions filling his mind. As quickly as possible, Harry rolled back on his side and closed his eyes. He instinctively grabbed his right wrist and felt his wand still in his wand holster. That was a relief. At least he wasn't completely defenseless.

"Good boy," Sirius wiped some sweat off his forehead.

"Move it!" a deep annoyed voice barked as he entered the room. "This has already taken too long. The Dark Lord wants the Prophecy tonight and you all know what he's like when we fail."

"Yeah, well. You're the one that chose that life so don't complain!" Remus barked and the other three stared at him. "Well, they did!" he tried defending himself.

Death Eaters. Great.

Hands roughly grabbed Harry by his robes and pulled him towards the shelves. Harry held back a wince at the pain that shot down his spine. He needed to let them believe he wasn't conscious yet. From the sounds of the footsteps, Harry gathered that there were four Death Eaters in the room but knew there could be more just outside. He needed to think of something fast. Panicking wasn't going to help him now. He would deal with how Death Eaters managed to take him from Hogwarts and bring him to the Department of Mysteries with no one seeing them later. Now he needed a way of escape.

"Row ninety-seven, Avery," the deep voice said still sounding extremely annoyed. "The sooner we get Potter to touch the Prophecy the sooner we can dump the body."

"Excuse me? You're not dumping my son ANYWHERE!" James cried. "Padfoot, Moony, where are you?"

"We're getting there!" Remus assured him and whispered to himself, "At least I hope so."

"B—but M—Master told us h—he wanted P—Potter brought back w—with the Prophecy," a familiar voice said nervously. *Pettigrew*. That was a surprise.

"Why Peter? Why would you be there and not help Harry?" Sirius asked hurt.

"Shut it, Pettigrew!" ordered the man who was dragging Harry. "We're saving the Dark Lord from the trouble having Potter would bring unless you want to face your *former* friends again."

"I bet he wouldn't," Lily snorted.

Pettigrew let out a squeak. "I'm sure they would love to meet up with the one responsible for taking their precious charge away from Hogwarts. I heard an angry werewolf is one of the worst creatures one can face."

Remus smirked slowly and evilly. A glint in his eyes that told everyone he wanted to meet all of them, including Peter by the light of the full moon.

"Whatever we do with him, I just need a few moments alone," a female voice said with a laugh from behind Harry. She sounded almost eager.

"Quiet!" shouted the deep voiced Death Eater. "Why don't you all just alert the Ministry that we're here?"

"Yes, please do," Lily begged. "At least someone could come and help!"

Everyone fell silent allowing Harry to think clearly. He now knew three of the four Death Eaters who were in the room. Pettigrew would be easy if Harry acted quickly. The woman had to be Bellatrix Lestrange and she wouldn't be as easy along with Avery, his carrier. The fourth Death Eater and the leader of the group would probably be the most difficult. The man was already short on patience and clearly wanted Harry dead more than anything.

He would have to attack hard and fast before running for it. It was his only hope. Harry had no intention of touching the Prophecy. He would destroy it before he touched it. If Professor Dumbledore was so persistent to keep it guarded then Harry would do everything in his power to ensure Voldemort never heard the contents of it. *I just have to figure out a way to pull it off without getting myself killed in the process.*

As Avery began to slow his pace, Harry knew he was running out of time. He cleared his mind of thought and listened hard. After a few moments he could place where the four Death Eaters were in relation to him. Avery would be easiest to stun without anyone noticing. As discretely as possible, Harry flicked his right wrist and grabbed his wand tightly. His head was bowed, allowing him to open his eyes without anyone noticing that he was indeed awake. He could see Avery's feet. He would have to time this perfectly.

Pointing his wand, Harry saw his opportunity. *"Stupefy,"* he whispered. It was a direct hit. Avery fell to the ground, taking Harry with him. Ignoring the pain in his back and head, Harry rolled onto his back and flipped to his feet, his wand ready. He instantly stunned Pettigrew and turned to Lestrage and the other Death Eater who looked surprisingly familiar but Harry couldn't worry about that now.

"YES! Good boy Harry! Now stun them and get the hell out of there!" Sirius urged him.

"Very sneaky, Potter," the leader hissed as he pointed his wand at Harry, "but do you honestly think we are the only ones here? We killed Dumbledore's little guard and we won't hesitate to kill you. You can't take on all of us. *Crucio!"*

"NOOOOOOOOO!" Lily cried and James hugged her close.

"Who was the guard?" Remus asked shakily. Sirius shook his head signaling he didn't know.

Harry dodged the spell as he ran for cover behind one of the shelves. Closing his eyes, Harry reached inside his shirt and grabbed the pendants Sirius and Remus had given him for Christmas. He had to admit it. He couldn't face them on his own, especially if there were others waiting outside. He needed help. *Sirius, Remus, I need you. Please hear me.* The pendant warmed slightly in his hand. All he could do now was pray that someone would find him. Until then, he was on his own.

"We're coming Harry! We are!" Sirius cried.

A spell shot through the air and hit a Prophecy near his head causing a white figure to take shape. He had been found. Harry ignored the misty figure and fired a Reductor Curse at his attackers before running towards row ninety-seven. He didn't have much time before more Death Eaters entered the room. He pointed his wand over his shoulder and cast a Confundus Charm followed by a Stunning Spell. He glanced at the shelves as he ran past. Seventy-five...seventy-six...seventy-seven...He kept running.

"Look out Harry!"

Harry didn't have time to question the voice as he dove between shelves eighty and eighty-one. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw a red spell fly past. It would have hit him if he hadn't moved. Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry hurried to his feet and ran to the end of the long shelf before continuing towards row ninety-seven.

"Okay, no idea where that voice is coming from, and I still think it's dodgy but thank you anyway,"
Remus said faintly.

He reached row ninety but had to skid to a halt and dodge a Cruciatus Curse as Avery stepped out in front of him.

"Nott!" shouted Avery. "I found him!"

Harry quickly hit Avery with a Disarming Spell followed by a Reductor Curse which sent Avery flying backwards into a wall. He could hear loud voices outside the room but focused on the more dire threat. He had three Death Eaters somewhere trying to kill him. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw Lestrage and Nott step out from the shelves with their wands pointed at him. He returned his gaze to what was in front of him and saw Pettigrew approaching with his wand ready.

"Don't move, Potter," Nott growled. "One step and you're dead."

The sound of the door slamming open and someone entering startled them all, making the loud voices coming from outside clear. It sounded like a battle out there. Harry quickly took a step back towards the shelves as Barty Crouch Jr. ran towards them. "Dumbledore's here with at least ten from his Order!"

"YES!" the four teens cried and jumped in the air celebrating.

"Now Dumbledore is going to kick your ass!" Sirius cried happily at the book.

Crouch exclaimed then took in the sight of Harry nearly surrounded by three Death Eaters and one unconscious on the floor nearby. "We don't have time for this! Where's the Prophecy!?"

"We don't have it yet," Nott said as he glared at Harry. "Hold them off. This won't take long."

Crouch pointed his wand at Harry. "I think you've had enough time, Nott," he sneered.

"*Stupefy.*"

"*Protego,*" Harry countered then ran between shelves ninety-one and ninety-two. He pushed his legs to move faster than they ever had before. He was an easy target and there was no place to hide until he reached the end of the shelf.

The four Death Eaters moved to follow when the sound of several people entering the room forced them to turn back to the commotion. Harry took the opportunity to run towards the door. *Please let it be someone from the Order!* At the moment destroying the Prophecy was farthest from his mind. He was more concerned about survival and the presence of more Death Eaters would certainly make that more difficult.

"HARRY!"

Harry picked up his pace at the sound of Sirius' voice.

"Yes, Padfoot! You're there! Thank you!" James cried relieved hugging Sirius and Sirius noticed that James' cheeks were damp.

He turned and ran between shelves sixty and fifty-nine towards the sound of his godfather's voice. He could see curses flying back and forth through the air. Reaching the end of the shelf, Harry saw Sirius dueling with Lestrage while Remus was dueling with a cloaked Death Eater. He also saw Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, Bill Weasley, Moody, Hestia Jones, Dedalus Diggle,

Emmeline Vance and Elphias Dodge fighting along with Professor Dumbledore. Harry couldn't help but feel relieved. Help had indeed arrived.

"Yes, you'll be fine Harry," Remus said relieved. "Now run to safety!"

Unfortunately Harry was prevented from hurrying to Sirius' side when a pair of hands grabbed him from behind. He was pulled around roughly allowing Harry to see that Crouch had been the one to catch him. A hand rested around Harry's throat causing him to reflexively drop his wand and try to pry himself free. Crouch only tightened his grip, causing Harry to gag for breath and lose his footing, relying completely on Crouch to hold him upright.

"Dumbledore!" Crouch shouted as he pulled out his wand with his free hand and pointed it Harry's head. "Tell your people to stand down or Potter dies!"

"STAND DOWN PEOPLE!" Lily cried distressed.

That got everyone's attention. Silence filled the room as the Death Eaters slowly moved towards Crouch while keeping their wands pointed at the Order members. Harry struggled to breathe as he tried to claw at Crouch's hands. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears. His chest started to burn. His arms grew heavy as darkness crept in. Closing his eyes, Harry let his body go completely limp. He felt Crouch lessen his grip slightly allowing Harry to take in a small and quick breath.

"Let Harry go, Barty," Professor Dumbledore said firmly. "He's just a boy."

Crouch let out a laugh. "I don't think so, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I think we all know that Potter is more than just a boy. I taught him myself for months, remember? I was actually there that night Potter put the Dark Lord into a coma. We will be taking Potter and the Prophecy tonight and if you're lucky he won't experience much pain before he dies."

"Let him go, please," Lily was begging and crying and being hugged by a teary James again.

Harry's eyes flew open as a sudden wave of power filled his body, pushing away any sensation of pain. Any sort of panic he should feel was ignored with the desire to defeat the

enemy. Harry knew he didn't have a choice. He had to use this outburst of magic for as long as he possibly could. *If they want a fight, I'll give them one. I'm not going anywhere and neither is the Prophecy.*

His head slowly rose, catching Crouch's attention. Their eyes met causing Crouch to gasp in surprise. That was the only warning Crouch had before Harry slammed his forehead into Crouch's. Crouch lost his footing as Harry manually disarmed Crouch with one hand while calling for his own wand with the other. In the blink of an eye Harry had Crouch stunned and turned to look at the remaining Death Eaters.

"Take that!" Sirius pounded his fist in his other hand.

"No one's taking me anywhere," Harry said icily then launched himself at the nearest Death Eater, using both wands to cast spells with a speed and accuracy that was thought to be impossible. His eyes were shining brightly in the dim lighting, alerting everyone that Harry was in the middle of a powerful outburst and had no intention of stopping anytime soon. This caused a lot of uneasiness among the Death Eaters. The last time Harry Potter's eyes were glowing he had held his own in a duel against the Dark Lord Voldemort.

"Yes, be afraid. Be very afraid!" James growled.

The Order immediately jumped into battle as Harry flipped backwards to avoid a curse shot by Bellatrix. The Death Eaters separated into two groups: one taking on the Order and the other concentrating on Harry. Five Death Eaters surrounded Harry who quickly created a protective shield around himself before flipping forward and shoving his feet into the chest of a Death Eater Harry didn't recognize. The man fell to the floor with Harry landing in a crouched position on the Death Eater's chest before jumping up and turning in the air to bring a foot across another Death Eater's face. As that Death Eater staggered back Harry quickly cast full body binds on two Death Eaters that he did recognize: Crabbe and Goyle.

A spell hit his protective shield but didn't break through. Harry dodged a punch from Malfoy before falling to one knee and knocking Malfoy's feet out from under him. The Death Eater he had kicked in the face had regained his bearings and charged Harry. With one wand Harry sent a Trip Jinx before casting a Stunning Spell with the other. The Death Eater fell to the

floor with a thud. Harry turned his attention completely to Malfoy. He didn't give the father of his rival time to think. Before Malfoy knew what hit him, the man was stunned and in a full body bind.

"Bet they weren't expecting that much of a fight," Remus smirked.

With everyone else distracted, Harry ran for row ninety-seven. His outburst had finally passed so he was on his own now. Harry realized now that destroying the object everyone was fighting for was the only way to stop the battle. Voldemort would never stop trying to get his hands on it. Reaching shelve ninety-seven, Harry quickly looked at the names written on yellowish labels underneath the dusty glass balls. There were so many and he didn't even know what he was looking for. Sirius and Remus never told him what was written on the label. He finally spotted one just above his line of sight that was dated nearly sixteen years ago. Below that:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord

and (?)Harry Potter

That had to be it. Pointing his own wand at the glass ball, Harry glanced left and right before sending a Reductor Curse at it. The ball smashed into pieces as a pearly-white figure with unnaturally large eyes rose into the air. Harry took a nervous step backwards to see the figure's mouth moving as a distorted voice filled his ears. He couldn't make out what was being said which Harry was glad for. He didn't want to know. Eventually the figure stopped speaking and dissolved into the air.

"Well done!" Remus beamed.

"MOONY!"

"What? I'm congratulating Harry!" Remus said annoyed.

"No, it's in the book," Sirius explained pointing at the book in a shaky voice. He had read a few words ahead. He gulped and continued reading.

Harry paled at the sound of panic in Sirius' voice. Without another thought, he ran as quickly as he could towards the commotion to see Pettigrew with his silver hand around Remus' neck as Sirius fought his way to reach his best friend's side.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" James and Lily cried and in a second they were with Sirius holding Remus tightly.

"Get off him traitor!" James bellowed.

Remus fell to his knees as he started to convulse. Harry stared in horror as purple lines began to appear on Remus' skin as if an invisible person were drawing them with a quill.

Younger Remus was pale and shaking and the other three teens were dreading reading ahead.

Snapping out of his shock Harry pointed both wands at Pettigrew and cast a Stinging Hex with as much power as he could through both wands.

Pettigrew started to scream as his skin broke out in painful welts.

"You deserve a lot worse," Sirius said in a hoarse voice. "Doing that to Moony! He was your friend! He would have died for you!" he finished outraged.

He released his hold on Remus, causing the still convulsing werewolf to fall to the floor. Sirius was instantly at Remus' side trying to do anything and everything to stop the seizure. Before Harry to take a step towards them a beam of light caught his attention forcing him to duck out of the way. He shot a Stunning Spell in the direction the light came from hoping he actually hit something.

Harry was about to hurry to Sirius and Remus when his scar flared with pain causing him to stagger slightly. Voldemort was here. Harry knew it and he also knew that Voldemort was not going to be happy that the Prophecy was destroyed. *He'll order everyone killed. Sirius and Remus will be killed.* Harry wasn't about to let that happen. He *couldn't* let it happen. He couldn't let anything happen to Sirius and Remus. Remus was already injured. Harry knew he needed to end this quickly so Remus could receive proper care as soon as possible.

"Don't do anything stupid on my account Harry James Potter!" Remus ordered.

That left only one choice.

Letting out a sigh of defeat, Harry pushed his pain aside and gripped the wands in his hands tightly. He buried his fears and focused on his connection to Voldemort. He could feel Voldemort coming closer but he wasn't in the Department of Mysteries yet. There was still time. There was still a chance, a small one but any chance was better than none at all.

Everyone was still busy with their own battles. Sirius had pulled Remus into a corner and was still holding him in place as now more sporadic convulsions ripped through his body. With one last glance at his mentors...his family, Harry ran out of the room relying completely on his instinct for where to go. He entered an extremely brightly lit room that had clocks everywhere and ran down narrow space between a line of desks then into a dimly lit, rectangular room with what looked like a great stone pit in the center of it and an archway that had a tattered black veil hanging from it, fluttering in the non-existent wind. Harry didn't pay attention to any of the items in the room as he hurried through the door and into a dark circular room.

"Where is he going?" Lily asked worried.

Everything in the room was black including the ceiling and the marble floor. Black handleless doors were along the circular wall with branches of blue tipped candles between them. In all honesty Harry didn't know what door to try and he really didn't want to face Voldemort in this room. Closing his eyes, Harry once again concentrated on his link to Voldemort, instinctively walked to the door in front of him and pushed it open.

"He's looking for Voldemort!" Remus cried in a disbelieving tone. "That constitute stupid Harry! Get back to where we are now!"

Stepping out of the circular room Harry opened his eyes to see the lifts he had used when he had been at the Ministry over the Christmas holidays. What was he supposed to do now? If he chose the wrong floor Voldemort would reach the Department of Mysteries. His instincts had helped him up until now but he didn't know if he could trust them to pick the correct floor.

"I don't think he heard you Moony," Sirius whispered.

"Trust yourself, Harry."

"Shut up stupid voice!" James cried. "I'm going to kick your ass if you don't stop encouraging Harry to look for Voldemort!"

Harry quickly turned around with both wands at the ready but saw that he was alone. *All right Harry. Your mind is playing tricks on you. You did not actually hear the voice of your dead father telling you to trust yourself.* It had to be the stress or the exhaustion. It was as simple as that.

"No you didn't because I wouldn't say something daft as that! I'd tell you to go back to Moony and Padfoot because they surely have a Portkey or something to go home!"

"I'm trying to help you, Harry. Remember when you had that painful headache? I helped you through that. I want to help you, son. You just have to let me."

"Make the impostor shut up!" James cried.

"I have a bad feeling about this voice," Lily fretted.

Harry turned back around to face the lift and hit the button to call for one. Jangling and banging noises filled the air as a lift lowered. The grilles slid open and Harry hurried inside. He would deal with the strange voices in his head later and possibly commit himself but now he had other matters to worry about. Looking at the buttons, Harry followed his instincts and pressed the button marked 'Atrium'. The doors slid shut and he was lifted upwards.

As he rose floor by floor, Harry could feel the pain from his scar increasing. He was getting closer to Voldemort. When the doors finally opened, Harry cautiously stepped out with both wands ready to fire. He would need every ounce of training Sirius and Remus had given him now. He needed to be silent. He needed to catch Voldemort by surprise. He noticed the large fountain that he had seen in December. The pain in his scar intensified making Harry wince. Voldemort was close...extremely close but where was he?

As if on cue a familiar high pitched voice filled the air. "Harry Potter. We meet again." Harry instantly turned around to see a tall, thin and black-hooded figure with his awful snakelike face, white and bony. His deep red slit shaped eyes were staring at him, almost in a judging manner if that was possible. Lord Voldemort pulled out his wand and twirled it between his fingers. "You almost look like you were searching for me, Harry," Voldemort said curiously. "Have you finally realized that only I can help you see your true potential? Or perhaps you were hoping to merely delay me from killing your precious guardians."

"How does he know that?" Remus asked suspiciously.

"He guessed," Sirius said. "It's not hard to do after all Harry has done to protect me in third year."

Remus looked doubtful.

Harry fought to keep his emotions under control. He wasn't going to let his anger get the better of him. Keeping both wands pointed at Voldemort, Harry kept his stance ready as Voldemort began to walk around him. Harry followed him step by step. He still had the protection spell on but chances were it wouldn't last long against Voldemort's curses. It was only a matter of time before someone missed him down in the Department of Mysteries. It was only a matter of time before Dumbledore realized what Harry had done.

"I hope he comes soon," Lily whispered.

"So where is the Prophecy?" Voldemort asked as he pointed his wand at Harry.

"Where it belongs," Harry answered firmly. "Where it will stay."

Voldemort stared at Harry curiously for a long moment. "You're not interested in what it says?" he asked. Harry remained silent. "Interesting. Perhaps that is because you already know. I know you have power, Harry. Even now I can sense the power radiating off of you. You could be great yet you allow yourself to be used like a puppet for that old fool."

"Better than being *your* puppet," James growled.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a retort," he said through his teeth. "You don't know anything about me. If you did then you would know trying to offer me power is pointless. I will *never* join you, accept it. I became your enemy the day you killed my parents. I won't turn against them and I certainly won't turn against the family I have now."

Voldemort's lipless mouth smiled. "You should know better than most of what people will do for those they *love*," he said with a hint of mocking in his voice. "What if I could promise you that the blood traitor and the werewolf would remain unharmed? What about your precious friends? Wouldn't you do anything to save them from the pain they *will* face?"

"Harry, remember my words; don't do anything stupid on our account!" Remus begged.

"Your promises are empty ones, *Tom*," Harry said firmly. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Did Voldemort actually believe anyone would fall for such a pack of lies? "You once told me you could bring my parents back. I didn't believe you then I don't believe you would simply spare everyone in my life from the terror you bring."

Voldemort let out an angry hiss. "*Never* call me that!" he spat. "I am Lord Voldemort and you are just a child who understands nothing! If you refuse to join me then you *will* die tonight, Potter, and once I'm through with you I *will* take my time on your precious guardians before I kill them."

Tightening his grips on his and Crouch's wands, Harry struggled to hold on to his patience. He couldn't make the first move. Voldemort was expecting an impatient and emotional teenager. Harry had to be the exact opposite. "You haven't managed to kill me yet, *Tom*," Harry said evenly, aware that he was already treading on thin ice with Voldemort's temper. "No matter what happens to me, I know that you have lost. The Prophecy was destroyed. Your minions have failed. You have failed again."

"Don't anger him Harry!" Lily cried.

"WHAT!?!!" Voldemort shouted. "WHY YOU LITTLE BRAT! I'LL KILL YOU FOR THIS! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" the boys cried.

"He is dead! My baby is dead! He killed him!" Lily sobbed.

.....

A/N: I know there is not much commenting going on but it's hard to have them getting into long discussions in the middle of the action. It's more of their pleas for Harry's safety. Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 28

Fighting to Win

The moment the killing curse erupted from Voldemort's lips Harry moved for cover behind the fountain. Intense green light filled the Atrium for a moment and then it was gone.

"He wasn't hit. He wasn't hit, he wasn't hit," Lily chanted in whispers afraid that if she said it out loud it would turn out to be false. Seeming to want to give reassurance as well as get some James nodded.

"No he wasn't."

Knowing that he would need to act quickly, Harry jumped to his feet and fired a Disarming Spell followed by a Confundus Charm and a Stunning Spell at Voldemort who easily deflected the three spells. He knew he couldn't compete with Voldemort when it came to knowledge of spells but he did have a rather extensive knowledge of Muggle fighting that Voldemort most likely wouldn't approve of. *I'll need to use every advantage I can get.*

"Yes! That's my boy! Voldemort would never try Muggle fighting. He'd think it beneath him!" Sirius encouraged Harry.

Voldemort instantly started to attack the fountain with a large variety of different colored spells to remove Harry's hiding place. When the fountain started to break apart Harry had to dive out of the way to avoid being hit by large pieces of the golden fixture. Rolling on the

ground, Harry turned his body to face Voldemort and quickly shouted: "**IMPEDIMENTA, INCENDIO, LOCOMOTOR MORTIS!**"

The spells never hit their target. Voldemort vanished forcing Harry to move quickly. Hurrying to his feet, Harry turned just in time for Voldemort to appear. His reflexes took over. Harry jumped up and kicked Voldemort in the chest, taking the Dark Lord by surprise. Continuing his attack, Harry took a step forward and flipped backwards in a laid out position, his feet catching Voldemort in the chin. Harry landed firmly on his feet and instantly sent Jelly-Legs Jinx Voldemort's way.

"That's very bold Harry," Remus nodded tightly biting his lips. "Now, WHERE THE HELL IS DUMBLEDORE?"

Voldemort blocked the Jinx easily and vanished once again. Harry remained alert as he made a quarter-turn, ready to face Voldemort from whatever direction he appeared. However, Voldemort appeared across the room, out of distance for any physical fight. The Dark Lord looked absolutely livid as he wordlessly summoned a piece of the broken fountain. "If you want a filthy muggle fight, you shall have one," Voldemort spat as the fountain piece changed shape into an elegant silver sword.

"Like you would know how to," Sirius scoffed.

Lily looked uncertain and scolded Sirius, "Don't underestimate him."

"Prepare to die."

"No," James choked a sob.

Harry instantly muttered the incantation as he transfigured Crouch's wand into a sword similar to Voldemort's. He then switched hands so that the sword was in his right and his wand was in his left. He had practiced sword fighting with Sirius and accepted that he was right-hand dominant. Harry also trusted his own wand and knew that since he already had bonded with it, the holly wood with a phoenix core would most likely obey better than a foreign wand like Crouch's.

Voldemort and Harry each took cautious steps forward, neither wanting to be foolish and rush the other. Harry was aware that Voldemort had the advantage since he could Apparate silently and kept himself prepared for anything. All of his senses were on alert. He could feel the mist of the fountain against his face. He could hear Voldemort's angry breathing. He could almost sense Voldemort's anger and...eagerness? It wasn't an eagerness to destroy but an eagerness to learn. Harry quickly pushed the thought out of his mind. That was ridiculous.

After a long silence, Voldemort made the first move. "*Crucio!*" he shouted.

"HEY! You said Muggle fighting!" James bellowed.

"You really expected him to fight fairly James?" Remus asked without taking his eyes off the book.

Harry easily avoided the curse and fired a Severing Charm at Voldemort's sword. Once again Voldemort vanished only to appear a moment later to Harry's left already in mid-swing. Harry quickly brought his sword around to meet Voldemort's strike, the force of the blow causing Harry lower his right shoulder reflexively. Without a thought Harry pointed his wand at Voldemort and shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Voldemort's wand went flying as Harry turned out of the close contact with both weapons ready. The yew wand with a phoenix core landed on the floor as Voldemort gripped his sword with both hands before attacking. Voldemort moved to strike Harry's chest but Harry was already moving. He blocked the blow as he turned his body away to avoid the sharp object. Forcing Voldemort's sword towards the floor, Harry quickly jabbed his elbow into Voldemort's chin. It was a cheap blow but as Sirius had said: there was a difference between fighting dirty and fighting to win.

"Yes, there is!" Sirius nodded. "And it's not like Voldemort would pass the opportunity."

Harry finally understood what Sirius was talking about. There was no such thing as fighting dirty when your life was on the line.

The furious Dark Lord pulled his sword free and took a step back before silently summoning his wand. Harry quickly sent another Disarming Spell but this one was easily blocked. This time Voldemort made a quick strike at Harry's head forcing Harry to duck out of the way and send a Reductor Curse at his opponent. That was also blocked as Voldemort struck in a downward movement, ready to slice Harry in two.

Lily's nails were digging so hard on James arms that blood was starting to come out but James seemed to be oblivious to the pain.

Caught be surprise, Harry didn't have time to think. All he knew was that one moment Voldemort's sword was coming at him and the next he was across the room. Harry quickly stood and noticed that Voldemort was staring at him in surprise.

"Wow, he Apparated," Sirius said in awe.

That wasn't nearly have as surprised as Harry was at the moment. He had just Apparated! *Fight now, think about later.* Taking advantage of the distraction, Harry quickly sent a Stunning Spell, a Stinging Hex and a full body bind at Voldemort who quickly snapped out of his stunned state and vanished only to appear a moment later in front of Harry.

"Impressive, Harry," Voldemort said as he moved to strike at Harry's right side which Harry blocked. "You clearly have just begun to tap into your potential." With his sword still clashing with Voldemort's, Harry threw all of his strength into the action of pushing Voldemort backwards. It worked. Voldemort staggered back a few steps allowing Harry to quickly move and put a comfortable distance between them. "I underestimated you, again."

"Excuse me? Is he trying to strike a conversation?" Remus asked disbelievingly.

Voldemort sent a Cruciatus Curse at Harry forcing the teenager to jump out of the way. "Now I see why Dumbledore fears you."

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry shouted and saw Voldemort easily block the spell before wordlessly sending a purple colored spell at Harry who deflected the spell with his sword. "Dumbledore

doesn't fear me! There's nothing to fear! You're just trying to mess with my head! I won't fall for it!"

"Yeah, he won't, stupid snake face!" James cried. The other gaped at him. "I'm nervous, I can't think of a better insult!"

Voldemort lowered his sword slightly but kept his wand pointed at Harry. "Then why is he still suppressing your magic?" he asked simply as he took a step towards Harry who in turn took a step backwards. "I know you wear another necklace, Harry." A beam of light shot out of Voldemort's wand which Harry dodged. "I also know it has a tracking charm on it. The old fool doesn't trust you. Why do you think that is?"

"That's for Harry's safety you moron! Stop trying to get Harry to distrust Dumbledore!" Sirius bellowed.

Harry sent a Bat-Bogey Hex at Voldemort but it was blocked easily. "Maybe because there's an insane serial killer trying to kill me," he said sarcastically and shifted to the right to avoid a quickly approaching red colored spell. He hadn't known about the tracking charm but it made sense, especially considering how fast the Order arrived tonight.

"Your naiveté is amazing," Voldemort said dryly

"Your psychotic behavior too," Remus grunted.

as he fired a white spell at Harry who quickly transfigured his sword into a mirror and sent the spell back the way it came. With a wave of the wand, Voldemort banished the spell as Harry changed his mirror back into a sword. "I was like you once...so confident that my elders knew what was best." He fired another red colored spell which Harry blocked. "Then I woke up. I realized that it was all an illusion."

"Does he realize that he is Harry's elder and by his definition what he is saying is a load of bull?" Lily asked.

Harry cast a Disarming Spell but Voldemort quickly averted it. "They wanted to control me just like they are controlling you. They tried to stop me from the power that was granted to me through my blood. *Crucio!*"

Harry dived for cover once again behind the fountain. He couldn't believe that Voldemort was rationalizing his actions. There was no justification for killing innocent people. Hurrying to his feet, Harry cautiously moved around the half destroyed fountain so that it was between him and Voldemort. It was a good thing too because that was the only thing separating them. Voldemort had taken advantage of the distraction to close what distance there had been between them beforehand.

"We are the same, Harry," Voldemort continued as started to walk around the fountain with Harry echoing his steps in the opposite direction. **"We're both too powerful for them. They will always fear us. They *will* turn against you just like they turned against me. I can protect you from that."**

"First of all," Sirius hissed through gritted teeth. "Never say you and Harry are the same because he is your OPPOSITE! Secondly, I'd never turn on him nor would Moony!"

This is getting ridiculous. Why was Voldemort so confident that a few words would change Harry's mind? I'm nothing like Voldemort and I never will be. "Are you deaf as well as cracked?" asked Harry. **"I won't join you, Tom!"**

"Oh, good one Harry!" Remus cheered.

Voldemort stopped walking around the fountain with Harry following suit. From the narrowed gaze and the heavy breathing, Harry figured that probably hadn't been the smartest thing to say. **"No one says no to me!"** Voldemort shouted angrily as he raised his wand.

"Uh, I think he just did," James pointed out.

Did the Dark Lord just have a temper tantrum?

"Yep," Lily nodded.

That's certainly something you don't see everyday. "I believe I just did...repeatedly," Harry said dryly.

"That's a pity," Voldemort spat then pointed his wand directly at Harry's forehead. "AVADA KEDRVRA!"

Green light once again filled the Atrium as Harry dove out of the path of the killing curse.

"That's the second close call Harry had," Remus said thumping his chest as if to make his heart continue beating. "I can't take another one."

He landed on the floor hard and slid into the wall, his left shoulder making contact first. Pain shot through his shoulder and his back as Harry forced himself to stand and turn only to quickly bring his sword up and block Voldemort's angry blow. Harry quickly moved to the right to avoid a strike at his left side before blocking a quick strike at his midsection. Voldemort's attacks were too quick for Harry to do anything but react. He didn't have the time to think of a spell to cast with his wand but he refused to drop it to hold his sword with two hands.

Voldemort continued on his vigorous attack. He struck low, forcing Harry to jump backwards before striking high which Harry blocked. The strikes quickened as Harry desperately fought to hold his own. Voldemort was pushing him backwards and Harry's exhaustion from this battle and the one in the Department of Mysteries was beginning to show. Sweat was falling off his brow and stinging his eyes but Harry refused to give in. He continued to block every blow Voldemort made.

The clashing of swords echoed repeatedly through the Atrium. Voldemort's anger clashed with Harry's desperation. Harry continuously dodged the strikes he couldn't block in an attempt to keep himself from being pushed to the wall. Voldemort soon lost whatever patience he had left and shot a purple colored spell at Harry that hit him in the left arm, cutting through his personal shield, clothes and into his arm.

"NOOOOOOO!"

Harry let out a cry of pain as he dropped his wand and staggered backwards. Glancing down at his arm, Harry could see blood already soaking through his robes. He quickly returned his

attention to Voldemort just in time to dive out of the way and avoid being hit by an orange colored spell. Dropping his sword, Harry silently called for his wand and was relieved when his fingers wrapped around it. His left arm was useless. Any sort of movement was extremely painful and from the looks of it Voldemort had decided to rely on magic once again. Pointing his wand at Voldemort, Harry gathered as much strength as he could and sent a Reductor Curse.

The spell shot through the air at a startling speed, striking Voldemort in the chest before the Dark Lord had time to react. Voldemort stumbled slightly and grabbed his chest, giving Harry time to rise to his feet.

"Excuse me, a Reductor Curse should have killed him not made him stumble," James said in a mixture of anger, disbelief and worry.

With his wand at the ready, Harry knew he couldn't cast many more spells like that. He was beyond exhausted and his entire body was aching. Inhaling deeply, Harry concentrated on whatever strength, magic and sheer force of will he had left as he shouted: "*Protego Maximus*" a moment before Voldemort sent a white colored spell at Harry.

Voldemort's spell hit Harry's shield and seemed to stop for a moment before it started to push against the shield. Harry forced himself to hold the shield in place as his entire right arm started to shake from the strain. Slowly, Harry felt his body being pushed backwards as his feet slid against the floor. He felt the shield breaking a split second before it actually did. The forceful wave of Voldemort's spell hit him hard and sent him flying backwards into the wall. His back screamed in pain as he fell to the floor, dropping his wand in the process.

"No, no, no, no, no," Lily mumbled shaking her head in a trance.

Laying on his right side, Harry couldn't bring himself to think let alone move. The pain was too excruciating. He could only watch as Voldemort approached with a cruel smile on his face knowing that this was it. He had failed. Harry could only hope that Sirius and Remus were safe and that they would forgive him someday.

"There's nothing to forgive Harry," Sirius choked back a sob. "Don't give up! Please!"

"So this is how you shall die," Voldemort said as he pointed his wand at Harry. "Alone and defenseless. I'll be certain to pass on the news to your precious guardians as well as your mentor."

"He's not alone, Tom," a familiar voice said firmly causing Voldemort to quickly turn around. "Harry will never be alone. There are too many who care about him for that to happen."

"YES! HELP! FINALLY! WHERE THE HELL WHERE YOU?" James cried.

"Dumbledore!" Voldemort cried in rage as he wordlessly banished his sword and pointed his wand at the elder wizard before regaining his composure. "So you finally come to rescue your protégé? I must admit I was surprised that no one noticed he was missing until now. He fought well, Dumbledore, but in the end it wasn't enough." Without another word Voldemort raised his wand and shot a jet of green light at Dumbledore who turned and vanished only to reappear behind Voldemort.

Dumbledore flicked his wand, sending a forceful white spell at Voldemort. The Dark Lord quickly conjured a shining silver shield out of thin air and deflected it. A deep gong-like sound echoed throughout the room. "The Aurors are on their way, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly. "You never should have come here tonight."

"Now you're done Voldy! Hah!" Sirius said confidently.

"By the time they arrive you will be dead and I shall be gone with Potter," Voldemort spat as he sent another killing curse at Dumbledore but missed.

"Harry will never turn, Tom," Dumbledore said firmly as he sent a greenish-white spell at Voldemort but it was blocked by the shield. "Your obsession with him will grant you nothing." Dumbledore pulled back his wand and waved it as if it were a whip. A long and thin flame flew from the tip before wrapping itself around Voldemort, shield and all.

But the fire-like whip didn't stay that way. A moment later the whip had transformed into a serpent and released its hold on Voldemort before turning to Dumbledore, hissing furiously. Voldemort vanished as the snake rose from the floor ready to strike. Dumbledore quickly banished the snake with a flick of his wand then turned around just as Voldemort reappeared right in front of what remained of the fountain.

Another jet of green light erupted from Voldemort's wand but Dumbledore was all ready moving his own wand. Pieces of the half destroyed fountain rose quickly in the air and seemed to melt together into a shield in front of Dumbledore just as the killing curse struck, shattering the shield. The pieces fell to the ground with an echoing clang. That was the only sound heard for quite some time.

The two wizards stared at each other for a long moment before Voldemort stepped to the right and pointed his wand at Harry. "It is clear that we are at a stalemate, Dumbledore," he said firmly. "However I do have the upper hand. You care for the boy, there's no denying that and he cares for you. He would most likely die for you if you asked him. Quite a useful little tool you've made him." Voldemort took another step towards Harry. "You're not untouchable anymore. By killing the boy, I destroy you."

"Hey! Don't bring Harry back into the fight! Go back to Dumbledore!" Remus ordered.

Dumbledore glanced over at Harry who was having a hard time keeping his eyes open before returning his attention to Voldemort. The sound of hurried footsteps filled the Atrium alerting the three wizards that people were coming. "They have come for you, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly.

"They will be too late," Voldemort hissed and fired green light at Harry.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. For a second Harry saw green light and then a moment later he felt something grip his robes by his injured shoulder followed by a flash of warmth and red. Tiredly blinking away the color, Harry noticed that he was now on the floor behind Professor Dumbledore and the wall behind where he had been just a moment ago now

had additional structural damage. There was a slight weight resting on Harry's arm but Harry was too exhausted to acknowledge whether the weight caused him any additional pain or not.

"Breathe Moony, breathe," Sirius instructed as James grabbed a paper bag for a hyperventilating Remus to breathe in.

Pushing the paper bag away from his face Remus gasped, "I said I couldn't take another close call! I warned him! Why didn't he heed my warning?"

"He was a tad busy Moony," Sirius flinched. "Er, he's okay now. See, he escaped."

"Yeah, Lily, he escaped, please stop crying," James said in a hoarse voice going back to rub Lily's back.

Voldemort let out a frustrated cry before he vanished once again...and didn't reappear. The Dark Lord had fled.

After a long silence, Professor Dumbledore turned around and knelt down so he could take a closer look at Harry. He noticed Harry's injured arm as well as Harry's sweat soaked clothes. The hurried footsteps grew louder as Dumbledore shifted his gaze to just above of Harry. "Thank you, my friend," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Your timing is always impeccable."

A familiar trill filled Harry's ears. Fawkes had been the one to save him and was the weight he currently felt. Harry wanted to thank him but could only blink tiredly as people filled in the Atrium with their wands at the ready. "Dumbledore!" exclaimed Madam Bones. "Shacklebolt sent word that You-Know-Who was here. Is that Mr. Potter? What is he doing here?"

Dumbledore rested a hand on Harry's head. "Voldemort was here, Amelia," he said gravely, "and yes, this is Harry. I must admit that Harry had been taken from Hogwarts earlier this evening by some of Voldemort's followers. From what I understand there are quite a few Death Eaters down in the Department of Mysteries bound by an Anti-Disapparation Jinx and currently being detained by a few of my people who came to Harry's rescue."

"You heard him," Madam Bones said authoritatively. "Send two units to the Department of Mysteries and the rest of you fan out check all floors. If you find anyone who shouldn't be

there, arrest them. We'll sort it out later." The sound of hurried footsteps leaving echoed throughout the Atrium. "I can't believe this. You-Know-Who here of all places. What in the world would possess You-Know-Who to come here?"

"His obviously Psychotic behavior," James mumbled and then yelled, "NOW STOP CHATTING AND GET HARRY AND MOONY MEDICAL HELP!"

"I'm sure Remus is already with Madam Pomfrey," Lily said quietly. "They will both be fine," she nodded to reassure herself and Sirius looked worriedly at Remus. He pulled him close and hugged Remus' head to his chest as he kept reading ignoring Remus' pleas to be released.

"Amelia, I believe you know what is in the Department of Mysteries," Dumbledore said in the same grave tone. "Voldemort was after a Prophecy that had been made concerning Harry and himself. I promise I will explain everything but first I need to take Harry back to Hogwarts for medical attention."

"Of course, Dumbledore," Madam Bones said quickly. "I understand. Do you need any help? A Portkey, perhaps?"

Dumbledore nodded as he carefully repositioned Harry and pulled him into his arms. "That would be most appreciated," he said gratefully. Harry let out a moan as Dumbledore touched his injured arm sending a flare of pain through his shoulder and down his spine. "Just hang on Harry. Everything will be all right."

Harry's head rested against Dumbledore's chest. For some reason he seriously doubted everything would be all right. "P—P'fessor," he said weakly as he slowly looked up to see Dumbledore's concerned gaze. "I—I'm sorry...I tried...I couldn't..."

"I know, Harry," Dumbledore said soothingly. "I know. I understand why you felt you had to face him." He carefully placed an arm under Harry's knees, muttered something Harry couldn't make out and slowly stood with Harry firmly in his arms. "We can talk about it later. Right now you need to rest. I have no doubt you pushed yourself past your limit again."

"Yes Mister. We are going to have one serious talk when you are all better!" Remus said firmly as he managed to extricate himself from Sirius' hold.

Harry lowered his gaze and let out a sigh. That was probably the biggest understatement he had ever heard. Harry could slowly feel himself passing out when he suddenly realized that his wand was still in the Atrium somewhere. "Wand," he muttered as his eyes closed and a moment later felt something land gently on his chest but was gone a second later.

"Fawkes has your wand, Harry," Dumbledore said softly. "Rest."

Harry vaguely heard Madam Bones picking up a piece of the broken fountain and saying "*Portus*" before she handed the piece over to Professor Dumbledore. "I trust you'll contact me when you have a moment?" she asked.

"Of course, Ameila," Dumbledore said as he repositioned himself so that he and Harry were touching the Portkey. "Until then."

With the familiar sensation of a hook being jerked behind his navel, Harry kept his eyes closed as they disappeared from the Atrium only to reappear a moment later in the Hogwarts hospital wing. That was the last thing Harry knew before darkness consumed him.

"See, they are all getting medical aid and will be fine," Lily said firmly.

"But Lily, Harry and Moony-"

"THEY WILL BE FINE JAMES!" she yelled angry and James nodded vigorously quite scared at her.

.....

A/N: Thanks for reading and reviewing. And thank you Amber-Chick for writing her marvelous story "Reactions to the legend" from where I got inspired to have Remus' almost heart attack! If you haven't read her story go check it out!

Chapter 29

Decisions of the Heart

It was with great reluctance that Harry opened his eyes to find himself in a somewhat blurry and dimly lit room. His head was aching but it was nothing like the pain Harry had been in what felt like only a moment ago. His back was a little sore but again it was nothing like it had been before. Reflexively, Harry reached for his glasses sitting on the bedside table and slid them on to see that he was in a room that he didn't recognize. It looked a lot like the hospital wing but it was significantly smaller and there were no windows.

Slowly, Harry's mind started to clear and he remembered that Professor Dumbledore had brought him back to Hogwarts after Voldemort had escaped. He forced himself to sit up and started to panic when he didn't see Sirius or Remus in the room.

"We are asleep, because we had a very draining day but we are fine," Sirius said confidently.

"Sirius, silver poisoning-"

"Did you not hear Lily earlier Moony?" Sirius glared at Remus and said through gritted teeth. "We are both fine."

In fact, there was no one in the room other than a screen that blocked off the far corner. Where were they? Did something happen after he left the Department of Mysteries? Remus had been convulsing but it hadn't been as bad as when Pettigrew touched him.

Please let them be okay.

Grabbing his watch off the bedside table and putting it on, Harry noticed that it was after midnight. He must have slept through the day and into the night. Pushing off his bedcovers, Harry slowly slid out of bed. His bare feet touching the cold floor sent a chill up his spine. He

glanced down and noticed that he was dressed in a pair of hospital wing pajamas, the short sleeves allowing him to see that his injured left arm was completely healed. Madam Pomfrey had always healed him no matter how odd the injury. Surely she would have healed Remus.

"Of course," Lily agreed and James and Sirius nodded. Remus didn't look so convinced.

But maybe he still needed time to recover completely.

Bitting his lower lip, Harry slowly made his way towards the screen. Endless possibilities entered his mind but none of them could justify why a screen would be needed unless it wasn't Remus. It could be someone else from the Order that Dumbledore wanted to hide from the school. That had to be it. Sirius and Remus were fine. They were sleeping in the Marauder Quarters recovering from any remaining injuries they may have. It was as simple as that.

"Exactly," James said firmly.

Reaching the screen, Harry cautiously peaked around it and gasped at the sight before him. Lying in the bed was indeed Remus. He was dressed in a pair of pajamas similar to Harry's which revealed the strange purple wavy lines on his skin that Harry had seen in the Department of Mysteries.

"That's okay Harry. You know, some things take a little time to wear off. They are just lines. Moony is fine. He just looks bad," James tried to convince everyone but was failing miserably, especially since his voice was wavering so much.

Cautiously Harry approached the bed as tears filled his eyes. Remus looked so peaceful yet so ill. His hands were folded over his chest and remained oddly still. His lips were purple in a similar shade to the lines on his skin.

Harry waited for any sign of movement but after a few long seconds let out a sob when there was none. Tears fell down his face as he reached out to touch Remus' hands. *Come on,*

Remus. Please move. Please do something. Touching Remus' skin, Harry let out a painful sob when he found the skin cold.

"No! That's you! You are cold and think Moony's skin is cold. Get a thermometer. You'll see! Right? Right?" Sirius begged as he stared at the others. Lily and James were stifling sobs and Remus was pale and shaking. "Moony is fine!"

He looked back at Remus' face as he rested a hand on Remus'. "Remus?" Harry asked quietly. "Moony? Please...please don't leave me...don't leave us. I'm sorry...I'm sorry..."

"I didn't want to Harry," Remus whispered in a wavering voice.

Sirius grabbed him and held Remus' head to his chest, "Shut up Moony! You're fine!"

When Remus didn't move, Harry broke down in sobs as he rested his head on Remus' unmoving chest and wrapped his arms around his guardian as much as he could. Remus couldn't be dead.

James and Lily left their spot and joined Sirius in hugging Remus. The four of them were sobbing uncontrollably now and James was hiding his face in Remus' robes.

He couldn't! He promised! He promised he would always be there!

"You promised," Lily said in a hurt watery tone.

"Sorry," Remus apologized in a husky voice from between his friends' embrace.

This wasn't happening! It couldn't be! Remus was always so careful! Remus was always the one to scold Harry and Sirius for being reckless! He couldn't die!

"He can't," James shook his head that was still pressed on Remus' side.

Raising his head, Harry looked at Remus' face once again and saw that it still hadn't moved. He held back his sobs as he stood upright and moved so his head was over Remus'. Gently, Harry kissed Remus' forehead before he rested his own against his guardian's. "I'm so, so sorry, Moony," he said in a wavering voice. "Please forgive me. I...I thought I was protecting you." Harry closed his mouth as a strong sob threatened to emerge. Remus had been his mentor...his friend...his father for so long. Remus had kept him sane. Remus had kept Sirius sane. What were they going to do without him?

"Don't know," Sirius whispered through sobs.

Once the sob passed, Harry opened his mouth again. "I love you, Moony," he said shakily.

"I love you too cub," Remus said quietly.

"I'm sorry I didn't stop him. Please forgive me. You're a...a great dad. I should have told you so more often...I...I just always thought...there would be more time."

"Thanks," Remus whispered. "You're a great son."

"You did what you could, Harry. Moony knows that."

"Yeah, I do."

Harry instantly stood upright and looked around but found that no one had entered. This was not happening. He was not hearing the voice of his dead father again. It had to be some sort of trick. People don't hear voices of those who have been dead for over fourteen years. "Get out of my head, Voldemort," Harry spat. "Haven't you done enough?"

"Yeah, don't listen to him Harry!" James said firmly wiping tears away with the back of his hand. "He and Wormtail killed Moony!"

"Son, I understand you are confused but I'm here to help you. I know you're hurting but remember that Moony loved you just as much as you loved him. "

"Hey Voldy! Stop talking about Moony and impersonating me!"

"James does have a point," Remus reasoned trying to get his mind away from his death. "Maybe Occlumency didn't work."

"Maybe Snape just wanted to make us think it worked," Sirius nodded and it was a sign of how distressed they were that instead of scolding Sirius, Lily nodded with him.

"And because of me he's dead," Harry muttered bitterly.

"No, no Harry! Not because of you! Never because of you!" Remus pleaded.

He couldn't help thinking that if Remus hadn't gone after him...if Remus had just stayed at Hogwarts he would still be alive. *If I hadn't insisted on going back to the Gryffindor Tower alone I wouldn't have been taken.*

"No, that was Wormtail's fault. If he wasn't a little bastard. A sneaky little traitor none of this would be happening!" Lily growled.

"Not because of you but for you. Remus died for you just as your mother and I did. Just as you would do for us if you could."

"If Voldemort doesn't stop trying to mess with Harry's head and using me to do that I'm going to kick his ass!"

"How?" Sirius asked James.

"Dunno, but I am!"

Harry didn't hold back the tears that fell at 'the voice's' confirmation of Remus' death. "I don't know what to do without him," he admitted as he sat down in a nearby chair. For the past few years Sirius and Remus had been his entire life. They had given him everything he ever wanted. They had given him a family and a home where he wasn't hated.

"You must move on, Harry. It is the only thing you can do. I know you're in pain but you need to be strong. You will need your strength to do what will probably be the hardest thing you will ever have to do in your life."

"What," Sirius hissed dangerously, "is he going on about?"

Harry leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. He didn't think he could move on from this. He didn't want to move on. Moving on would be accepting that he would never speak to Remus again. Harry was still having a hard time grasping the fact that Remus was indeed gone. His chest ached to a point that it hurt to breathe. The pain he had felt at the Ministry was nothing when compared to this. At the Ministry both of his guardians had been alive.

"And what's that?" Harry asked at last. "What could be worse than this?"

"You have to protect Padfoot, my son, and there's only one way of doing that. You have to leave."

"WHAT?" the four teens cried suddenly completely alert.

"Please don't do something stupid like that on my behalf Harry! Please!" Sirius begged.

Harry quickly stood; his eyes wide with disbelief. "No!" he whispered in horror. "I can't leave him! Sirius just lost his best friend! If I left it would kill him!"

"Yes, you can't. I'd die!" Sirius nodded frantically. "Don't leave me like they did Harry!" he said a little accusingly towards the other three.

"We didn't want to," James whispered sadly.

"But you did," Sirius whispered brokenly back.

"If you don't leave, he will die. Voldemort knows your weakness now, Harry. He will go after Sirius to get to you. Is that what you want? Do you want to lose Sirius too?"

"SHUT UP! STOP TELLING HIM LIES!" James cried.

Harry backed into the wall and slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor. He couldn't breathe. Lose Sirius? Lose Midnight? Lose his last remaining dad? No. He would do anything to prevent that. He would rather die than lose his remaining guardian. 'The voice' was right. Voldemort had known that his guardians were his weakness. Voldemort knew Harry would do anything to protect them even if it cost him his life.

"Yes, and don't you find it too convenient that a voice in your head reminds you of what Voldemort knows!" Remus growled angrily. "Use that brain I know you have somewhere in there!"

Closing his eyes, Harry grabbed his chest and tried to fight the pain that flared from his heart. Could he do it? Could he abandon those he loved in order to protect them? *What choice do I have?* He couldn't let Sirius fall to the same fate as Remus. He couldn't let any of his friends

feel this pain that consumed his heart, consumed his very soul. "What must I do?" Harry asked at last.

"You know what to do, my son. Remember, we are proud of you."

"No, no, no," Lily mumbled. "He's going to do something stupid!"

Harry broke down in silent sobs as he pulled his knees to his chest and buried his face. This wasn't supposed to be happening. He was supposed to be worried about what he would be doing during the summer holidays, not mourning the death of one of his fathers and planning his departure from the world he had spent over five years in. What was he supposed to do? If he managed to get out of Hogwarts, what then?

"Stay where you are!" James ordered.

A warm and gentle breeze filled the room causing Harry to jump in surprise. Looking up, Harry noticed the door was still closed and he was still alone. He cautiously rose to his feet and glanced around but found that nothing had changed. Resting a hand on the wall, Harry gasped at the tingling sensation that started at his fingers and ran down his arm. He pulled his hand away quickly and the tingling sensation abruptly stopped.

Cautiously, Harry once again touched the wall and closed his eyes as the tingling sensation flooded his entire body. Feelings of concern, sympathy, regret, and protectiveness flooded him. Harry didn't know how he knew but somehow he understood that Hogwarts herself was passing on her sympathies to him. He understood that she regretted not protecting him from those who had taken him and that she wished to help him now with his despair.

The four teens were so distraught over what Harry was about to do that not one of them remembered to comment on Harry's probable empathy.

Opening his eyes, Harry looked over at his bedside table and saw his wand in his wand holster. He reached out and silently called his wand. It flew into his hand still attached to his wand holster. Harry put the holster on his right wrist and closed his eyes again. "I need a way to my dorm room that no one will see me," he said softly. "I need to leave."

A moment later a flash of fire made Harry quickly turn around to see Fawkes standing on the foot of Remus' bed. The phoenix let out a mournful trill. Harry bowed his head as he fought to hold back the tears that wanted to start falling again. He couldn't even think of Remus without his despair and heartache surfacing. "Fawkes," Harry said forcing himself to think of something other than Remus. "You have already done so much for me but I need to ask for more. I need your help."

"Don't you dare help him Fawkes!" Lily said dangerously. "Or I'll be cooking Phoenix with mashed potatoes soon!"

Fawkes let out a soft trill as if to say 'I know'.

Harry approached the bed and gently started to pet the phoenix. "I need to get to my dorm room with no one seeing me and then I need to leave this place before anyone notices I've gone," he said softly. "Can you please help me?"

Fawkes trilled softly, his eyes meeting Harry's. It was clear that Fawkes didn't approve of Harry's decision but he understood this was something Harry needed to do. Spreading his wings, Fawkes flew up and landed on Harry's shoulder the gently rubbed his head against Harry's in a reassuring way. Harry closed his eyes and bit back another wave of tears as he once again approached Remus. He placed both of his hands over Remus' cold ones and let out a long breath.

"Moony...Dad...I love you and I'll never forget you," Harry said with a quivering voice. "I will keep him safe. I promise."

"Yes, and you know the best way to do that?" Remus asked huskily. "Is staying right were you are!"

Backing away, Harry looked one last time at his guardian before his vision was blinded with flames forcing him to close his eyes. Warmth surrounded him for a brief moment and then it was gone along with the weight on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, Harry saw that he was in his dorm room. He could hear Ron and Neville snoring and knew he would have to be

extremely quiet so he didn't wake anyone up. Fawkes had landed on his bed and appeared to be waiting patiently for him to do what he needed to.

"I'm very eager to be tasting Phoenix with mashed potatoes," James said eying the book evilly.

Hurrying to his trunk, Harry pulled out a few sets of muggle clothes along with his money pouch, Gringott's key, some ink, parchment and a quill. He took his school bag, emptied it and transfigured it into a muggle backpack. He changed into a set of his muggle clothes including a hat to cover his hair and scar before packing the rest. He pocketed his Gringott's key and threw his money pouch in the front pocket of his backpack. Grabbing a piece of parchment, Harry sat down on his bed as he uncorked his ink and dipped his quill in. He wasn't going to leave without leaving something behind for Sirius. He needed to let Sirius know that this was the way it had to be or Sirius would come after him.

"I'll come after you anyway!" Sirius growled. "And you'll be grounded for the rest of your life young man!"

Gathering his thoughts, Harry ran his fingers through his hair as he tried to put what he needed to say into words. He needed to say goodbye. He needed them to know this wasn't just a threat. He needed them to move on without him. Finally, Harry just started to write hoping that it would make sense.

Sirius,

By the time you read this I will most likely be far from here. I'm so sorry for what happened. You and Remus gave me everything and this is how I repay you. I never wanted anything to happen to either of you. Both of you gave me the one thing I had always wanted: a family. You will always be my family but this is necessary for everyone. It's the only way.

"No it's not!" Remus said firmly.

Please don't look for me. I need you to let me go. I need you to move on without me. Please believe me when I say I am not running from my responsibility. I know there is no running from Voldemort. I know he will find me sooner or later and when that time comes I can only hope that I am strong enough to make you and Remus proud. It's the least I can do.

"We are proud already! And we'll be prouder if you stay where you are!" Sirius begged. "Please!"

Please tell everyone I'm sorry. I know I've disappointed them. I tried to stop them. I tried to stop Voldemort but I just wasn't quick enough. Hopefully when the time comes I will be ready for what needs to be done and if not, then at least I know you're safe.

I'm sorry for what I've put you through, Sirius. I'm sorry for everything.

I love you Dad.

"I love you son," Sirius whispered brokenly.

Harry.

Once the ink had dried, Harry folded the parchment and wrote Sirius' name on it. He brushed away the tears that were once again falling as he packed his remaining parchment, ink and quill. Standing up, Harry left the note on his pillow and turned to Fawkes. The phoenix glanced at him before taking flight. Harry watched in confusion as Fawkes quietly trilled while flying in a circle above his head. His confusion multiplied as he started to feel tingly. What was going on?

A strange voice that Harry knew he had heard before answered his unasked question. ***"He is using his own magic to protect you, my child. He is shielding you from being found unless you want to be found."***

"Well, at least that," Lily huffed. "Maybe I'll roast you quickly then."

Gasping in shock, Harry looked up at Fawkes who had stopped flying and slowly landed on Harry's shoulder. He understood that Fawkes wanted to protect him but it sort of canceled out the main reason he was leaving in the first place. ***It also makes sure no one can find me...including Sirius.*** Fawkes' protection could give him the chance he needed to prepare himself. "Thank you, Fawkes," Harry said softly as he reached under his shirt. He still had on the suppression necklace and knew he couldn't take any chances, phoenix protection or not.

Carefully, Harry unhooked the clasp and set the necklace on the bed. He would have to deal with any outbursts that came without the crutch that the suppression necklace had become. Closing his eyes, Harry mentally thanked Hogwarts for her help. He felt a small reassuring wave rush over him before opening his eyes and grabbing his backpack. Looking at Fawkes, Harry nodded that he was ready to go. He once again was blinded by flames and surrounded by warmth and closed his eyes until the journey was over.

"I SAID PLEASE!" Sirius cried shaking Remus. "I SAID PLEASE AND HE JUST IGNORED ME!"

It was only a moment later that Harry opened his eyes and found himself on the steps in front of Gringott's Wizarding Bank at Diagon Alley. Looking at his watch, Harry saw that it was nearly two in the morning. He looked up at Fawkes with a raised eyebrow. What were they doing here so early? It wasn't exactly what one would consider banking hours. Was he supposed to wait for six hours until the bank opened?

Before Harry could voice his questions, the door to the bank opened and a familiar looking goblin stepped out. It was Griphook, the goblin that had taken him to his vault when he was eleven. "Mr. Potter," the goblin said with a nod. "Follow me please."

Harry glanced at Fawkes in confusion before he followed Griphook into Gringott's. The marble hall was dimly lit. All of the stools behind the long counter were empty. This was just too weird. "Er—excuse me," Harry said cautiously. "What's going on? How did you know that I was out there?"

Griphook turned and looked up at Harry. "Mr. Potter, there is always at least one goblin at Gringott's for emergencies," he said. "Goblins are magical creatures. We can sense when we're needed, especially by another magical creature. It is not our business to ask how and why. I trust you have your key."

"I guess we'll be having roasted phoenix and roasted goblin then?" James asked annoyed.

Harry pulled his key out of his pocket and handed it over to Griphook. The goblin looked at the key before continuing on his way. Fawkes remained on Harry's shoulder with his head against Harry's. Griphook opened a door at the end of the hall and waited for Harry to walk through before following. They entered a narrow stone passageway that was lit with flaming torches. Harry moved aside as Griphook whistled and a small cart came rolling up the tracks towards them. Harry climbed in followed by Griphook as Fawkes hopped off of Harry's shoulder and landed on the ground, signaling that he would wait for their return. Harry glanced back at Fawkes one last time before the cart took off.

They reached Harry's vault quickly. Griphook unlocked the door then moved aside for Harry to enter. It had been years since Harry had entered his vault. Ever since Sirius...no. He couldn't think about that now. Harry opened the front pocket of his backpack and pulled out his money pouch. He filled it with gold coins before leaving with the pouch still in his hand. Turning to Griphook, Harry once again fought to keep his emotions under control. He couldn't afford to break down now.

"I need to exchange this into muggle money," Harry said softly.

Griphook nodded then closed the door and locked it before handing the key back to Harry who pocketed it. They climbed back into the cart and quickly rode back to where Fawkes was waiting. Stepping out of the cart, Harry handed his pouch over to Griphook as Fawkes took flight and landed back on Harry's shoulder. Griphook led the way back into the marble hall before going behind the counter and climbing up on the nearest stool as Harry walked around to the customer side of the counter.

"The exchange rate is five pounds for every galleon," Griphook said as he set Harry's pouch on the counter. "From weight, you have approximately seventy-five galleons in your pouch. How much would you like to exchange into British pounds?"

Harry tiredly rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. He could feel that everything was starting to catch up with him. He would need to find a place to rest soon and the Leaky

Cauldron was certainly not an option. He could surly be recognized there. "I think fifty galleons should be enough," he said. Two hundred and fifty pounds should last him long enough to find some sort of employment.

Griphook counted out the galleons out of Harry's pouch before handing it back to Harry. The goblin then counted out the British pounds before placing it in an envelope and handing it over. Harry put both containers of money in his backpack. He would need to purchase a wallet soon. That much was clear. With their business concluded, Harry thanked the goblin for his help then leaving the bank. He stepped out into the darkness and before he could do anything was gone in a flash of flames...

...And appeared a moment later in what looked like a rather comfortable hotel room. There was an extremely large bed in the middle of the room with a bedside table and a lamp. Looking at the stationary on the bedside table, Harry noticed the words 'Hilton Trafalgar' written on it. Harry instantly looked up at Fawkes who chose at that moment to fly over to the bed and curled up into a ball. "Fawkes," Harry warned. "This is cheating. This is illegal."

"You could always just go back home," James suggested.

Fawkes looked at Harry and actually glared before letting out an annoyed squawk as if to say 'so what'. Harry just shook his head as he set his backpack on the floor and took off his shoes. He walked over to the window and looked out to see Trafalgar Square lighted only by street lights. Fine. He would stay here for the rest of the night but tomorrow he would find a legal place to stay that he could afford. The last thing he needed was to be arrested.

Staring out of the window, Harry reached in his shirt and pulled out the only necklace he still wore, the necklace that held the pendants of his three fathers. Two were dead and one that he would never see again. Harry couldn't bring himself to think of what Sirius would be going through when he noticed the empty bed at Hogwarts. He didn't want to think of how hurt his friends would be the moment they realized he had deserted them. They were safe now and that was all that mattered.

.....

Far away in a barely lit room, a thin cloaked figure sat back in his chair and glanced down at the large snake resting at his feet. The past few hours had been nothing short of confusing. His anger at his failure and the failure of his followers had vanished when he had strangely felt intense pain throughout his body. It took him a moment to realize that the pain was coming from someone else. *Potter*. After some prodding, he managed to discover the source of young Harry Potter's pain.

The werewolf.

"Shut up!"

"Stupid snake face!"

"Mutated moron!"

"Psychotic megalomaniac!"

The boy had been suspicious at first but, in the end, Potter's emotions had been exactly what he needed to turn the tables on the muggle-loving fool. After all, a grief stricken teenager out in the middle of nowhere with no protection whatsoever was too good of an opportunity to pass up. At the moment, Potter would probably sacrifice himself if it meant that his precious godfather would remain unharmed.

All four started banging their heads at the first hard surface they found once they had their suspicions confirmed.

Was the werewolf actually dead? The cloaked figure didn't know and he really didn't care. What was important was what Potter believed to be true. He found it odd that the steady link had been abruptly cut off but he was confident that enough damage had been done on Potter's fragile mind. He would discover what had broken the connection later. Now he needed to plan. Potter had been stubborn before the bitterness of mortality had hit him. If the boy's stubbornness continued then he would just have to use the boy to cause enough damage to the muggle-loving fool before both of them were killed.

"Such lovely thoughts," Remus bit out sarcastically.

The cloaked figure knew he would have to use a completely different strategy now. Potter would still be defiant but he was also desperate. Those two qualities were never a good combination. The boy was too emotionally dependent on others for his own good, especially the blood traitor and the werewolf. It wasn't a surprise. Potter's precious guardians had provided everything a troubled orphan could ever want. In Potter's mind, the blood traitor and the werewolf had all the answers. That sort of devotion was rare and would be impossible to break.

Removal was the only option. The cloaked figure realized this. He had handled Harry Potter completely wrong. The boy didn't want power. Potter only wanted to live in peace with his family and would stand against anyone who threatened that. Perhaps he and Potter weren't so alike after all.

"Finally caught on to that did you?" Sirius snorted.

They had similar upbringings but their paths had diverged the moment the blood traitor and the werewolf became the boy's guardians. How ironic it was that one so powerful would want nothing to do with obtaining power.

He will make a perfect servant after he's broken.

"He won't break!" James yelled.

A soft hiss pulled the cloaked figure out of his thoughts. Looking down at the now conscious snake, the cloaked figure smiled evilly at the revelation. "Don't worry, Nagini," he hissed at the snake. "You shall have another companion soon." The snake lowered its head and went back to sleep. The cloaked figure stared off into the darkness already thinking of the possibilities. Memories could be altered. Perceptions could be skewed.

Let the fun begin.

"You won't succeed!" Remus said firmly as Sirius closed the book and said bitterly:

"I honestly hated this book."

.....

"Me too. I hope the next brings Harry back home, Moony resuscitated and Voldemort gone forever!" Lily agreed.

James looked around to see if the other book showed up.

"We have to go to sleep for it to show up Prongs," Remus reminded James.

"Like we will be able to," he said looking sadly at his friend who he did not want dead.

.....

A/N: I don't share Sirius' views! I do share Lily's though.

Thank you all for reading and reviewing my story and the sequel is up son.