

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 1

Harry Potter's Hogwarts letter arrived on a perfect summer day, when Harry and Snake -- Snake the Second, as Remus and Sirius knew him -- were sunning themselves near the big rock, down by the river at the bottom of the garden.

Remus was still at work at the bookshop, and Sirius was working on the house, a new hobby of his; just currently he was re-securing the guttering in anticipation of a wet autumn. They wouldn't be here in autumn, of course, but Sirius had tried to retain some semblance of normalcy, as the summer drew on; Harry suspected Sirius didn't like change much, and was trying to put off the inevitable.

Harry blinked when the letter landed lightly on his chest, and waved as the owl swooped away. He tilted his head back and saw Sirius dangle from the guttering for a moment before dropping handily to the ground.

"Owl post!" Sirius said excitedly, throwing himself down next to Harry. "Open it then! No -- wait -- camera -- and Remus should be here -- "

"Sirius, don't make a big deal," Harry said. "Let me open it."

"Wait till Remus comes home?" Sirius pleaded. "He'd kill us if he missed it."

Harry sighed. "Why can't I open it? We all know what it's going to say."

"Rite of passage, this is," Sirius said, tapping Harry's letter. "Big moment in a young lad's -- ow!"

Harry bit down a grin as a heavy packet hit Sirius in the back of the head, nearly bowling him over, and another owl flapped away. Sirius rubbed his head, and reached for the thick envelope lying in the grass.

"Bit old for Hogwarts, aren't you, Sirius?" Harry asked. Sirius thwacked his godson, and examined the cream-coloured envelope intently.

"Small wonder," he said. "It's from Severus Snape. He must have told the owls where to go."

"What is it then?" Harry asked. "Or is getting clobbered with a huge bulky letter another rite of passage in a young man's life?"

Sirius gave him a playful scowl, and ripped the envelope open.

"To Sirius Black, Guardian of Harry Potter, et cetera..." Sirius skimmed the letter. "Clippings from the Prophet," he muttered. "News about Peter -- or apparently lack thereof. Suppose this is his idea of a welcome back to the Wizarding World."

"Does he say hello to me?" Harry asked eagerly, craning his neck to see the neat, copperplate handwriting. Sirius snapped the letter shut.

"Not directly," he replied. "Here, you want to look through the clippings with me?"

"Sirius! Harry!" someone called, and both turned to see Remus rounding the corner of the house, carrying a satchel and walking his bicycle. He leaned the cycle up against the house, under the ladder Sirius had used to get onto the roof with, and tossed the satchel to Sirius, who caught it. "Couple of books for you. Library was having a -- is that a Hogwarts letter?" he asked abruptly. Harry waved it and grinned. "Congratulations, Harry. Go on then, open it."

Remus sat crosslegged in front of Harry, Sirius leaning over his godson's shoulder, as Harry lifted the red wax seal and took out his official Hogwarts letter. He grinned as both men let out a low, relieved breath. There was a moment of slightly reverent silence.

"Your dad and mum'd be that proud," Remus said gently. Sirius ruffled Harry's messy hair.

"We'll take you to Diagon Alley, end of August," Sirius decreed. "Get you your robes and your wand and everything. Send you off in proper style for the son of James Potter and heir of the House of Black. Get you a racing broom too."

"Says here first years aren't allowed racing brooms," Harry said, examining the letter.

"Oh, it always says that. We'll smuggle one in," Sirius assured him. Harry looked from Remus' quiet smile to Sirius' broad grin, and sighed happily, leaning back against the rock, basking in the afternoon sun.

"Mum! Dad! They've arrived!"

Padma and Parvati raced down the walk and out onto the pavement to greet their parents, waving their Hogwarts letters proudly. Ram Patil caught Parvati up in a big bear hug, and Sarasvati took Padma's hand, accepting the letter solemnly.

"Both of you, then?" Ram inquired of Parvati, who beamed and nodded while he set her down. Padma saw the glance her parents exchanged, and

shared in the relief evident on their faces. Parvati had been regularly setting the drapes on fire as proof of her magical ability since she was three; Padma had barely shown any magic at all, and what she did show wasn't really all that convincing. She'd been worried her sister would go off to Hogwarts without her.

It wasn't, she felt, an unjustified worry. She and Parvati had never really been good at doing the twins-joined-at-the-hip thing like the Weasley brothers were; their parents had often wondered aloud how they'd managed to share the same womb for nine months, since they hadn't been able to share a bedroom for more than three before they started wailing at each other whenever they were put in the same crib.

Sarasvati squeezed Padma's hand. "Of course they're both going. They're our daughters," she said proudly, as they walked back up the steps and into the house. "This calls for a celebration. Where would you two most like to eat?"

Padma entered the squabble over restaurants with vigour, as she was usually able to trick Parvati into demanding to go the one place Padma wanted; it was all a matter of triggering Parvati's competitive streak, and then aiming it in the proper direction. Most of Padma's life was spent calmly using her wits to make sure her sister didn't bowl her over with typical Parvati enthusiasm.

The rest of the evening was spent in a flurry of celebratory dining, floo-calls to various relatives and friends, a couple of calls to Padma and Parvati's friends to see if they'd gotten theirs yet (poor Annabelle was a squib, it appeared, though she'd never been much fond of magic so she was taking it rather well). It wasn't until Padma went to put on her pyjamas that night that she really thought about what the Hogwarts letter meant.

She'd be leaving her bedroom, her books, her games and puzzles. She could take a few of them, she supposed, the ones she really liked, but for the most part she'd be going to a new place, with new things, and might end up having to share a bedroom with Parvati, if they were sorted into the same house.

Her mother found her clutching the corner of the bedspread, standing indecisively over it, staring at the letter on her lamp-table. Sarasvati stroked her daughter's hair, soothingly, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Aren't you pleased?" she asked. "You're going to Hogwarts, like your father and I did. And you'll have your sister there. Besides, all your friends are going."

Padma nodded, and slid into the bed, watching her mother from her pillow.

"It's all right to be a little frightened," Sarasvati continued. "I was. But you'll have a wonderful time, Padma. Hogwarts will be the most fun, and you'll meet so many wonderful people."

"Mum, what house do you think I'll get?" Padma asked softly.

"Well, your father was a Gryffindor and I was a Hufflepuff, so it's anyone's guess, love. Worried about sharing rooms with Parvati?"

"I want to be Padma. Not Padma-and-Parvati," Padma said.

Her mother smiled, and stroked her cheek. "You are Padma," she said softly, kissing her forehead. "That's all you need. Sleep now. Dream good dreams of Hogwarts."

Padma nodded and rolled over, closing her eyes, but sleep was a long time in coming.

Narcissa had decided, when Draco was younger, that owls were filthy creatures that should not be inside of respectable homes, no matter how old a Wizarding tradition the Owl Post was. Owl deliveries to the Malfoy estate were redirected to a perch outside the kitchen, where one of the house-elves would accept the post, pay if necessary, and send the bird off without Narcissa ever seeing it. Draco thought it something of a shame, as he liked owls, but he contented himself with watching them from the kitchen window.

His tutors, after thoroughly preparing him for the rigors of Hogwarts, had been sent off in early April with suitable letters of recommendation and small bonuses for their services; Draco had nothing to do all summer but mooch around, keep out of Narcissa's way, and watch for his letter. Surely he'd get one. He couldn't imagine what would happen if he didn't. He'd be seriously contemplating matricide. After all, if it was good enough for Orestes...

They didn't get much post, at any rate, Narcissa being what Draco now knew to call a "recluse", though he rather thought barking mad covered the bases pretty well also. He felt guilty even thinking it; it made him want to hide somewhere, but all his old hiding places were too small for him now, and if he wanted to escape Narcissa he had to retreat to the library, and lose himself as best he could in the sheet-covered stacks. Narcissa didn't like the library, so it was usually safe, unless she was on an especially angry rampage, in which case nowhere was.

They'd only had four owls since April, and two of those had been adverts.

Still, he sat on the stool near the kitchen door that led out to the owl-post depository and the midden, and read, or talked to the house-elves, or simply just stared at the sky. He liked watching the sky change. You never had to worry when the sky changed moods, because even the stormclouds were lovely in their own right. He could get lost for hours, and it was just as well, because otherwise he'd just get into mischief again, and Narcissa would come looking for him.

The plain brown barn-owl fluttered down, squawked when it landed access to the kitchen window, and landed sulkily on the perch provided. As if in spite, it relieved itself right after it landed. Draco smiled at the caprice, then leapt to his feet when he saw the envelope it held in its beak.

"Mendy is going to get the Owl Post, Master Draco -- " one of the house-elves said worriedly, but Draco thrust her aside and went himself, snatching a handful of owl treats from the bowl near the door, and offering them shyly to the little brown owl, who dropped her letter into his right hand and promptly gobbled two treats from his left. He tucked the letter in his shirt pocket and stroked the soft, downy head -- but only for a moment, before the little owl screeched her goodbye and soared away.

He scattered the rest of the treats on the ground, in case any passing owls should want one, and turned to the kitchen door.

The house-elves, all nine of them, were gathered in the doorway, watching him with wide, bulbous eyes.

"Master Draco is going to Hogwarts!" Dobby squeaked.

Draco smiled.

"Master Draco is going to Hogwarts," he agreed, pleasure welling up inside him at the thought, only pinpricked by fear at the very edges. The house-elves looked at each other.

"Mendy is baking Master Draco a cake," Mendy said decisively, and with that, the congregation of elves dissipated.

Draco sighed as he touched the letter in his pocket, gently.

Now he just had to tell his mum.

Neville had, it was true, some training in tolerance. Being raised by his grandmother, he'd had to develop quite a bit of patience. When Andromeda had first brought the boy home she'd found him quiet, polite, shy, and not terribly competent. Then again, after Nymphadora, as long as he didn't drop the dishes on a regular basis, she wouldn't ask for much.

Still, she realised it was a bit much to ask a boy to spend all day in his stifling, formal dress robes, and as soon as they arrived home after Nymphadora's Academy graduation, she let him run upstairs and throw off the robes, changing into more comfortable clothing for the reception that they were holding in the temporarily-emptied show-room on the bottom floor of Grimmauld Place -- now known as "Tonks & Tonks, Purveyors of Fine Wizarding Dress". Nymphadora looked like she, too, would like to change out of her Auror's dress uniform, but she was going to be meeting her trainer -- two years of classes, one year of apprenticeship, that was the Auror programme -- for the first time, at the reception, and she wanted to make an impression.

Neville came thumping down the stairs just as people were starting to arrive, and he greeted them with the hurried politeness of a ten-year-old who knows that delicious things are being prepared in the kitchen and, if he makes a pathetic face, samples will be distributed. Andromeda watched him from the doorway with a smile; two years ago, she would never have imagined this bright, energetic child could be the same frightened boy who'd been taken away from such a dour, unloving home. And to be sure it had been a long two years; Neville still hid under the bed whenever Death Eaters or You Know Who was mentioned, and he insisted on checking all the locks at night himself. Andromeda wondered how he was going to fare, sharing a room with a handful of other boys -- and Hogwarts boys were known for borrowing without asking first -- but she put it out of her mind. He'd come this far. He'd survive.

Besides, Harry would be going to Hogwarts too, and she'd ask Harry to look out for him. She'd already had words with Severus about making sure Neville didn't lose anything -- he was famous for losing things -- or get too badly picked on by any of the other boys. Severus had muttered that a boy had to learn to stand up for himself, but she was nearly positive he'd intervene, if he had to. If he wasn't picking on Neville himself, anyway. Nymphadora still feared the name Snape.

Andromeda sighed, and wondered how she and Ted, who were a fairly normal pair, as Magical folk went, could raise a klutz like Dora and a dreamer like Neville. Not that she didn't love them, of course. She loved them more, on account of it. Still, she did wonder if there wasn't some sort of curse.

Neville was in the kitchen already, pestering Ted for a bite -- just a little bite! -- of the carrot cake he was icing.

"What do you say, love?" Ted asked, wrapping one arm around her waist and pulling her close as he deftly guided the frosting onto the cake with his wand. He finished with a flourish. "Shall I give him one of the cupcakes I made with the extra?"

"You take the cake in," Andromeda said. "Neville and I can finish in here."

"You just want me out of the way so you can give him two," Ted said, but he kissed her cheek and carried the cake into the other room, calling out the names of a few family friends. Andromeda found the cupcakes and gave Neville one, eating the other one herself as he grinned at her. The charmed wriggling sprinkles on the icing tickled their tongues. Ted had made these especially for them, since wriggling sprinkles were clearly beneath the dignity of most Aurors.

"Dora's a real Auror now, huh," he said, around his cupcake.

"Almost, sweetheart," she replied, licking her fingers.

"I'd be scared to be an Auror," he said. Andromeda, remembering Frank and Alice, smiled gently.

"You'd make a fine Auror. You'll be good at whatever you do," she chided gently. Neville flushed and looked down. She was going to admonish him not to be embarrassed, when there was a scrabbling at the window, and she reached out to let in the post-owl who was scratching at the glass. The big black owl hooted, and Neville shied away a bit as it hopped towards him, holding a letter in its beak.

"Oh -- " Andromeda beamed, accepting the letter and giving the owl some carrot-cupcake to maul. "Look, it's your Hogwarts letter."

Neville's eyes went wide as she opened it and passed it to him. After a minute, he looked up, and a broad grin split his face. "I'm going to Hogwarts!"

"Of course you are!" Andromeda laughed, and hugged him. "Come on, let's go tell everyone!"

He caught her hand, and she stopped on her way to the door, turning to look at him quizzically. He clutched the letter to his chest, tightly.

"But it's Dora's party," he said.

"Yes, but sweetheart, everyone's here -- "

He shook his head. "I don't want to."

She turned and crouched to be closer to his level. "But Neville, it's a big day for you!"

"But it's Dora's party," he repeated stubbornly. "Everyone should be talking about her. Not about me."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "We can tell Dora and Ted at dinner, and everyone else tomorrow. Please?"

Andromeda looked at his round, solemn face, and finally, she smiled.

"You," she said, "are going to be a wonderful man someday, Mister Longbottom."

He blushed again, and folded the letter carefully, placing it on the windowsill. Andromeda watched him prepare himself to go out into the crowd of people now filling the other room, and followed, joining in the loud admiration of Tonks' new badge and uniform and diploma.

She couldn't have been prouder of either of her children.

The day the Hogwarts letters were mailed to the first years, Severus Snape could not stay still, nor eat properly; Dumbledore met him in Hogsmeade, walking swiftly towards the outlying marshland north of the mountains, once known as the Hogsmeade Fens. He was dressed in his usual black trousers, a green shirt hanging off his shoulders, his still-short hair somewhat wild; he looked all of seventeen or eighteen himself, except for the three jagged stripes on his right temple, the mark that was a battle-scar of his fight with Peter Pettigrew two years previous.

"There's no need to be anxious, Severus," Dumbledore said, falling into step next to the pale Potions master. "It's only the letters."

"It's more than that, this year, and you know it," Snape replied, slowing his stride only slightly to match Dumbledore's. "Harry's coming this year."

Dumbledore smiled and walked slower still, forcing Snape to slow as well. "Indeed he is. Are you nervous because he might not remember you? Or because he might?"

Snape looked at him sharply, his expression so surprised that Dumbledore knew he hadn't even been considering that part of it.

"What if the owl can't find him?" he asked finally. "Or -- if they've decided to send him somewhere else?"

"You've told the owls where he lives. If all else, they'll simply wait until he leaves the house. The owls always find the students," Dumbledore said gravely. "That's old magic. And Sirius Black would not send his child anywhere but Hogwarts. He loved this school far too much to deny Harry his place here."

"How can you know?"

"Because I am not hampered by the same affection you and Sirius hold for the boy," Dumbledore answered.

"It's not the boy," Snape muttered. "It's just he's meant to go here and I haven't invested my own time in his education just to -- "

He stopped when Dumbledore held up a hand.

"The owls will find him, Severus. Sirius will bring him to Diagon Alley and then to the platform. The train will take him and all his companions to the school. You will see Harry again, at the feast, in a month's time. You've waited this long, Severus. You can wait another few weeks."

Snape ducked his head and kicked dust of the Hogsmeade road, looking like nothing so much as the sullen twenty-year-old boy who'd come to Dumbledore because he had nowhere else to turn.

"I may have missed his...unique outlook on life," he admitted dourly.

"I am sure by the time he leaves school you will be heartily sick of it, if that is any consolation," Dumbledore said, resting a hand on his shoulder and turning him back, towards Hogwarts. "Come. We have preparations to make for the school year."

Snape sighed, so quietly Dumbledore almost didn't hear it, and followed.

After Harry was asleep that evening, Sirius curled up on his own bed, sore from the work he'd done and tired from all the talk that afternoon about Hogwarts. Remus, drowsing against his back, warmed him some; he'd discovered werewolves ran hot, something that was only an issue in the late summer when Remus would threaten to leave them both for somewhere in northern Canada where the weather knew what it was about. Now, Sirius welcomed the extra heat; he could feel it leeching the pain from his shoulders.

"So," Remus said quietly, arm draped over his hip, twining one hand in his, "Harry's going to Hogwarts."

"That's the plan," Sirius replied, eyes closed, tired of thinking.

"Do you want me to start looking for flats in London?" Remus asked.

"No," Sirius said, sullenly.

"It'll do us good to get out of Betwys Beddau," Remus mused, ignoring him. "It's lovely here, but I miss big cities, and being able to do magic whenever I pleased. It doesn't have to be London. We could move back to Little Whinging if you really wanted."

"Don't make fun."

"Or we could go north. York. Newcastle, even. I don't think Hogsmeade would be wise -- too close for my tastes," Remus said. Sirius felt warm lips on the back of his neck. "I mean, if I was Harry I wouldn't want me living that close. Bit embarrassing, like."

"I like it here."

"Mmm, you would," Remus answered, now touching his stomach lightly, tracing small circles just above the loose pyjama bottoms he wore. "Content to dream your days away..."

"I don't see what's so wrong with that," Sirius said, relaxing into the touch, the reassuring solidity of the man now kissing his shoulder.

"I want," a gentle bite on his earlobe, "to be able," a kiss on his jaw, "to do magic again..."

Sirius turned a little to welcome Remus' kiss, familiar after two years, but still with the capacity to take his breath away. They lay there for a while, Remus propped over him, resting against his body, hands inching across his skin before finally tugging at his pyjamas. He could feel Remus' arousal pressed against his hip, but just as warm and promising were his hands, everywhere at once, gliding over sensitive skin, teasing him until he moaned softly, and gave up trying to sulk.

"In London, with our magic back, I could do the most wicked things to you," Remus murmured in his ear. "I know all sorts of lovely charms..."

"Don't need 'em," Sirius answered, gasping under the onslaught of sensation. He managed to catch one of Remus' hands with his own, and guided it across his stomach, and lower. Remus chuckled in his ear, unresisting, and stroked him lightly.

"A vote of confidence," he said, in a voice that made Sirius whimper.

"You...please..." he managed, and felt another laugh rumble in Remus' chest. The deft, slow strokes stopped and Remus reached across, moaning in his ear as he rubbed against him. Sirius fumbled the drawer of the nightstand open, and pressed the small jar into Remus' hand. He felt the other man pause as he warmed the oil, and then a slick pressure, Remus whispering things in his ear one would never believe the studious-looking man could say --

He turned his head for another kiss as Remus pressed against him gently, and then inside him, still wondering at oh how good it was and how Remus, please he had ever gone without it. He closed his eyes and lost himself in the easy rhythm, the unhurried way Remus kissed and touched him. It was effortless, just to allow the other man to draw him closer, away from the world and its threats, from everything he was afraid of. It was all right, here, in this bed, and he barely caught his breath as he came, though Remus shuddered and cried out his name.

Silence for a minute, two, as they cleaned up a bit -- this was so much easier with magic -- and readjusted themselves to sleep. Remus finally

buried his face in Sirius' broad back, and murmured softly, lips moving against the skin of his shoulderblade, "We're all right, Pads. S'gonna be okay."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed, unable to remember precisely what he had been worried about. "Love you, Moony."

"Mmm. You too, Sirius," Remus mumbled, slipping into sleep.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 2

That August, Diagon Alley was full of parents and students as well as the usual shoppers, the hangers-about, the street vendors and gossips. Andromeda's boutique was doing a booming business as students bought school robes and formal robes; some parents were drawn in while waiting for their children to finish making their purchases independently in other places. No matter that 12 Grimmauld Place was -- for all intents and purposes -- a rundown town-house in the middle of a bad London neighbourhood; inside it was "a shrine to classic fashion and style" (Daily Prophet, 9 April 1990) and it was easily reached through a portkey shopfront in Diagon Alley.

None of this was in the minds of Remus and Sirius as they followed Harry up the stairs from the tube station and out into Charing Cross Road. Harry had a backpack of the few things from home he wanted to bring with him; all his guardians had were their wands, tucked in their back pockets. One of the notes in the packet sent to Sirius was that their wands would re-activate the first time they set foot in Diagon Alley. They were watchful as they guided Harry towards the Leaky Cauldron, but nothing seemed amiss --

Until they stepped inside.

Word had got around in the two years they'd been gone that Sirius Black had taken young Harry Potter into seclusion with some tutor, a chap named Lupin whom some of them had known at Hogwarts, memorable mainly for his lack of memorability and sickly disposition. Sirius' face was relatively well-known, as he was heir to a fine old house, and his name popped up occasionally in connection with Andromeda Tonks; when they walked into the Leaky Cauldron, it was Sirius that everyone noticed first, tall and handsome as ever, trailed slightly by a scar-faced brown-haired man and guiding, by the shoulder, a slim young boy...

Sirius cleared his throat as silence fell throughout the pub. Finally Tom, the barman, came forward.

"To be sure, Sirius, it's good to see you again," he said, holding out his hand. Sirius shook it. "And this'll be young Harry Potter then, won't it?"

"This is Harry," Sirius rumbled, with an ominous look for anyone who would accost the boy or give him grief. Several people leaned in to each other to remark they didn't like the look of the bloke behind them. A bodyguard, perhaps? "Harry, this is Tom."

Harry held out his hand automatically, and Tom beamed wide as he shook it, showing a toothless grin. Other people came forward slowly as they made their way through the pub, introducing themselves and saying what an honour it was to meet the boy. Harry shook hands politely, and grinned once or twice; some of them, it was true -- and after two years in the Muggle world, these things became evident -- were dressed extremely oddly.

"Quirrell, old chap!" Sirius exclaimed, as they reached the back of the pub. A young, nervous-looking man lifted his head -- face pale under a shock of unruly, auburn-brown hair. "Of all the people to run into. Harry, this is Joseph Quirrell. He was with us at school, a year below -- I tutored him for his OWLs," Sirius said, as Quirrell held out his hand to shake Harry's. "Transfiguration and Potions. Good to see you, Quirrell."

"P-p-pleasure, I'm sure," Quirrell stammered. "H-h-hallo, S-Sirius -- L-l-lu-lu -- "

"Hi, Quirrell," Remus said, sparing the man. "Good to, er...see you again. What brings you to Diagon Alley?"

"Oh, I-i-i have some p-purchases to m-make," Quirrell answered. "T-t-t-teaching at Hogwarts this year -- "

"Are you really?" Remus asked interestedly. "Well done you! What's your subject?"

"Best not be Transfiguration!" Sirius grinned.

"D-d-defence Against the D-d-dark Arts," Quirrell smiled weakly. Remus glanced at Sirius, who was hiding some emotion -- concern, amusement, perhaps dismay -- rather well. "I s-suppose I'll see you there, eh H-h-harry?"

"That you will -- which reminds us, we should be getting on. Good to see you again," Sirius continued, gently guiding Harry out the back door.

"Good luck at Hogwarts," Remus added, following. When they were out into the poky little alley behind the pub, he met Sirius' eye. "What on earth happened to him? He was always a bit of a runt, but my god!"

"Dunno," Sirius said, removing his wand from his pocket and giving it an experimental shake. A few reddish sparks flew off the tip. "Oh, splendid; look Moony, they work again."

"And that one's teaching Defence? Very peculiar," Remus continued, while Sirius tapped the bricks in order. Harry, who had come to Diagon Alley as a child in the months between his kidnapping from the Dursleys and their move to Wales, beamed brightly and stood very still as the bricks slid back. Sirius felt happy pinpricks across his skin as Diagon Alley appeared before them.

"Welcome home, Harry," he murmured.

They stepped out into the street proper, and Sirius glanced at Remus to find him holding his wand as they walked, levitating a pound coin in front of them; clearly Remus had missed magic more than Sirius.

"First thing we've got to do is go to Gringotts and get these notes changed," Sirius said, the floating pound coin reminding him. He had a thick roll of hundred-pound notes in his back pocket; hardly the majority of his Muggle bank account, but enough to open and nicely pad an account with Gringott's. "Read off your list there, Harry, and remind me what all you need."

Harry pulled out the already much-worn addendum to the Hogwarts letter. "Three sets of plain work robes -- "

"We'll get your uniform at Andromeda's," Sirius said, pointing as they passed the Portkey shopfront with Hogwarts uniforms in the windows and TONKS & TONKS over the door.

"-- there's a bunch of class textbooks -- "

"Flourish and Blotts," Remus said, and both Harry and Sirius could hear the book-lust in his voice.

"-- a set of potions stuff -- hey, you think we'll see Professor Snape?" Harry asked. Sirius growled.

"Shouldn't doubt he's lurking somewhere."

Harry swatted him with the letter. "If we do, you have to be nice, Sirius," he scolded.

"Fine, fine."

"Anyway, I also have to get a telescope, a pewter size-two cauldron, a set of brass scales, and a wand," Harry finished, staring as they passed a potion supply house, with a barrel of dried rhinoceros beetles out front.

"We'll have to stop by the pet shop, too," Sirius said. "I know a witch -- well, if she's still working there -- who can tell us whether it's okay to bring Snake to Hogwarts..." as he spoke, a small, triangular head poked up over Harry's collar, and he sighed. "I did say you might want to leave Snake home," he said, a trifle scoldingly.

"He wanted to come," Harry replied, not at all put out. "He's having an extremely good time. There are lots of new tastes," he translated, as the snake hissed gently in his ear.

"Boy talks to snakes, I'm sure I don't know where we went wrong," Sirius muttered good-naturedly, as they arrived in front of Gringott's. "Now, if I remember right -- "

"Good lord, look," Remus said. "There's old Hagrid."

"The gamekeeper?" Sirius asked, scanning the crowd of people inside. "I don't -- oh, of course," he added, as a large shape loomed in front of them. Neither Remus nor Sirius were particularly short men, but Hagrid towered over them both, his huge mass of hair and beard making him look even bigger. He was talking to a goblin as they walked, carrying a small, paper-wrapped parcel in one hand. "Hagrid!" Sirius called, and the man turned to look at them. "Rubeus Hagrid!"

"As I live an' breathe," Hagrid said, as the goblin wandered off. He sidetracked from his course and joined them just inside the entrance. "Black and Lupin. Hallo boys, how're things then?"

"Fine, Hagrid," Remus answered, with a grin. "Keeping out of trouble."

"You two? Not bloody likely. The number a' times I had to chase you an' your mates ou' of my pumpkin patch -- here, now, and you're young Harry Potter, aren' you?" Hagrid said, bending over to hold out his hand to Harry, who almost stepped backwards, as though an avalanche were descending. "Knew yer dad an' mum. Good people. Here for yer school stuff, are ye?"

"Shake hands, Harry," Sirius murmured, and Harry took the giant man's hand, nodding as he regained polite composure. "Yes, sir," he added. Sirius knew Harry had seen Hagrid when he'd visited Professor Snape, years ago, but Hagrid would have known him by another name -- if he remembered Parvus Rana at all.

"Here on business?" Remus inquired politely, indicating the package. Hagrid stuffed it hastily into his enormous overcoat.

"Sort of, sort of. Fetchin' somethin' for Dumbledore. Top secret Hogwarts things," Hagrid said, somewhat proudly, and Remus and Sirius exchanged a grin.

"Give him our regards," Sirius said. "Excuse me, I think a window's just opened up..."

They said their goodbyes quickly and Sirius laid down the roll of notes, watching as the goblin behind the counter thumbed through them, weighed out the appropriate amount of gold, and measured it into two sacks, at Sirius' request; a smaller one which he handed to Harry, and a much larger one.

"I'll hold this, and your backpack," Remus said, taking them from Harry. "How'd you like to go see Sirius' new vault with him?"

"Would I?" Harry asked Sirius, who grinned.

"It's the ride of your life, lad," Sirius answered. "Staying here, Moony?" he asked.

"I'll be just outside," Remus promised, waving them on.

Breathless and exhilarated from the ride, they rejoined Remus just as he was finishing up a haggle with a shopkeeper outside a second-hand shop next to the bank. The tables out front of the shop were strewn with miscellaneous junk, but Sirius whistled low when Remus held up his find, a set of antique scales that were burnished with age and use.

"Bit of a treasure, this," he said, as the shopkeeper grudgingly wrapped it in brown paper and took his payment. "Thought you might like it for your scales, Harry. It's a bit nicer than the new rubbish they sell for students -- cheaply made stuff. Though if you're embarrassed to be using second-hand scales -- "

"No, I like them," Harry said easily, accepting the package from the shopkeeper and shoving it in his pack.

"When I was a boy I did all my school buying in the second-hand shops," Remus said, as they ambled up the street. "You'd be amazed what you'd find. There's a little street just below Madam Malkin's, Mardjinn Alley...but we'll buy all your robes and books and things new, of course," he added hastily, and Sirius noticed the tips of his ears turning red. Remus had never had much to spend on school things, as a boy, he remembered -- his last two years, he hadn't had much himself, and he had fond memories of their gloriously adventurous shopping expedition in Mardjinn Alley while James and Peter went to Madam Malkin's and Flourish & Blotts.

They bought his cauldron and telescope, potions supplies and dragonhide gloves, and Sirius and Harry took their new acquisitions to the Leaky Cauldron, where they rented the last available room for the night, while Remus went into quiet paroxysms of joy over all the new releases in Flourish & Blotts. By the time they reached him, he'd arranged to have five or six of the most interesting delivered to their room, and gathered up all of Harry's necessary texts, plus a few extras he "thought Harry might enjoy." Harry, who had picked up a rampant bibliophilia from his guardians, added four more to the pile, including one on the myriad uses of snakes and snakeskin in charms, potions, and divination, while Sirius conferred with Remus on what he should buy himself and what he could nick from Remus' purchases. Sirius gave the delivery boy a pitying look when their order was finished, and tipped him a Galleon for his pains.

"We'll pick up your wand next," Sirius decided, while buying ice-cream cones, "and then we can go get your robes just in time to have tea with Andromeda," he added with a wink. He'd sent her a handful of cautious letters over the years, mailed well outside of Llangynog district (outside of Wales, for that matter) by Muggle post, but of course she couldn't write back. "Be good to see her again."

"And Dora and Neville and Ted," Harry added. "Reckon Neville's still living with them?"

"Don't see why he wouldn't be," Sirius agreed. They stopped outside of Ollivander's, and Sirius held the door.

"I've one or two private errands," he said. "You two behave. I'll meet you outside of Andromeda's shopfront when I'm finished, yeah?"

Remus gave him a quizzical look, but nodded and herded Harry inside.

Ollivander's hadn't changed much since Remus and Sirius had been first years; still the small empty space at the front, the rest of the room filled with row upon row of small, narrow boxes in shelves that stretched to the ceiling.

"Lupin, ironwood, twelve and a quarter inches, bit on the skinny side -- unicorn hair. An unusual wand for an unusual young man, eh?"

Harry flinched slightly at the sudden sound, but Remus smiled and touched his shoulder reassuringly as an elderly man stepped out from the rows, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Yes, Mr. Ollivander," he answered, calmly. "Given me good service, it has."

"Oh yes? Let's see how you've served it, then," Ollivander replied, holding out a dry, callused palm. Remus took his wand out of his pocket and laid it in the older man's hand. Ollivander appeared to weigh it, examined one end and then the other, slid his fingers along its length, and gave a satisfied grunt.

"Always said you'd be a man to take care of your wand," he said approvingly. "Could do with a bit of polish, but in the end that's just appearances."

"Thank you, sir," Remus replied, accepting his wand back again. Ollivander turned his strange, unblinking eyes on Harry, and Remus squeezed his shoulder.

"Ah yes...I thought I'd be seeing you soon," Ollivander said, stooping a little. "Harry Potter. You have your mother's eyes. She had a lovely wand for charm work -- ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Your father, on the other hand, favoured a mahogany wand -- eleven inches, pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration." Ollivander gave Harry a not-very-reassuring smile. "Well, I say your father favoured it -- it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course." He leaned closer, fingers drifting towards Harry's forehead. "And that is where -- "

"We're interested in Harry's wand, today," Remus said quickly, and Ollivander glanced up at him, almost reprovingly.

"Of course," he said, and withdrew slightly. "Mr. Potter. Let me see."

Harry held out his right hand and submitted to the fitting calmly, only looking a bit startled when the tape measure began taking measurements on its own as Ollivander withdrew into the stacks. He returned with a pile of boxes just as the tape measure finished, and set them on the counter in front of him. "Try this one to start. Beechwood and dragon heartstring, nine inches. Nice and flexible."

Harry glanced at Remus, who smiled encouragingly. "Go on then, Harry, give it a bit of a wave."

Harry reached for the wand and waved it around, but Ollivander immediately took it away from him.

"No, no, that's no good. Here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy."

Again, as soon as he lifted it, it was taken away again.

Ollivander laid out several more wands, but each was a failure, until the boxes began to pile up in front of them, and Ollivander began searching deeper and deeper in the shelves.

"A tricky customer, eh?" Ollivander said, while Harry looked disconsolate and Remus perplexed. "I have a few more, now..."

He set two down on the table. Harry tried the first one -- ten and a quarter inches, maple and unicorn hair -- to no avail, and was reaching for the second one when he paused.

"Not that one," he said. Ollivander looked at him curiously.

"Why not, Harry?" Remus asked. Harry glanced between the two men, then looked embarrassed.

"Er...Snake doesn't like that one," he mumbled. Ollivander looked up at Remus for an explanation, and Remus tilted his head at the sinuous body wrapped loosely around Harry's neck.

"His snake," he said.

Ollivander leaned forward, and Snake lifted his head to stare beadily at the pale, moonlike eyes.

"I'm a Parselmouth," Harry explained, only a little wearily. "I talk to snakes."

"Why doesn't he like this one, out of curiosity?" Ollivander inquired, taking the confession in stride.

"He says it smells like wicked," Harry replied. "It'd be like us smelling rotten meat, a bit," he added. Ollivander lifted the wand and examined it, then looked up sharply at Harry.

"Neither you nor your serpentine friend could know," he said slowly, "that this wand's wood is from the same tree that supplied the wood for Peter Pettigrew's."

Remus tensed. Harry's face went pale, and then his eyes hardened a little. Ollivander merely looked thoughtful.

"I wonder now -- " he muttered to himself, taking down another wand. "Ask your snake what he thinks of this."

Harry had a private conference with Snake, and turned to Ollivander. "He doesn't care about this one," he said, pointing to it. "Shall I try it?" he asked, and without waiting for Ollivander's answer -- Remus saw the man about to protest -- he picked it up.

A stream of red and gold sparks flew from the end, lighting up the room and making Snake duck his head quickly back under Harry's collar. Remus grinned.

"Holly and phoenix feather," Ollivander said slowly, when the sparks had died down. "Eleven inches. A very supple wand. Very...very curious," he added, as Harry studied his new wand. Snake poked his head out again, tentatively, and then slithered down Harry's right arm to have a better look at it.

"Curious?" Remus asked, wary after the incident with the wood-brother to Peter's wand.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold," Ollivander said gravely. "And there was another wand...thirteen and a half inches. Yew. A very powerful wand, and in the wrong hands..." his unblinking eyes drifted to Harry's forehead. "The phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand gave another feather -- just one other, to the yew wand which -- well, which gave you that," he said, indicating the lightning-bolt scar.

"Mr. Ollivander -- " Remus began, but Ollivander was still speaking.

"Curious indeed," he mused, "how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember...I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things -- terrible, yes, but great."

"That's enough, I think," Remus murmured. "We'll pay for the wand, please."

"I could get another wand," Harry said, hearing the tension in his voice. Remus shook his head.

"The wand chooses the wizard," he said. "Even I know that. The wand, Mr. Ollivander, and two tins of polish, if you would."

Harry put the wand back in its case and held it anxiously as Remus took the tins provided and paid out of the rapidly-depleting sack of wizarding coins. When they were outside, Remus seemed to relax slightly.

"I'm not going to get in trouble, am I?" Harry asked.

"Of course not," Remus answered, giving him a reassuring smile. "It was just a bit startling, that's all. And er...I think you should probably keep it to yourself, Harry, the...origins of the wand. You don't mind, do you?"

"I don't care," Harry answered, stroking the case lovingly. "I like it. It feels..."

"...right," Remus answered, and Harry grinned at him. "I know. I remember buying mine."

Sirius was waiting patiently for them on the pavement when they finally pushed through the crowd; he waved, and Harry ran to meet him.

"Bought you a trunk for your school things, while you were shopping -- got your wand?" he asked excitedly, and Harry opened the case, taking it out to show it to him. "Oh, that is splendid."

"Holly and phoenix feather," Harry announced. "And Mr. Ollivander had a look at Remus' too."

"Bought some polish," Remus said nonchalantly. "Otherwise all's well. Shall we?"

The door to Andromeda's shop was propped open to let in the warm summer breeze, and as they stepped over the threshold, there was a moment of dizziness, quickly passing when the portkey had done its work. Inside was a large room, well lit, full of clothing racks and hatstands, with a glass case of strange jewelery on one side, and a counter and till on the other.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to -- Sirius!"

Sirius found himself nearly bowled over by Andromeda, who threw herself into his arms and hugged him tightly before stepping back to give Harry and then Remus the same treatment. "Don't you three look well! I was wondering when we'd see you in here," she added.

"It's good to see you," Sirius said, smiling warmly.

"And Harry!" Andromeda continued, while Harry blushed. "Look at you, all grown up. Starting Hogwarts this year?"

"Just got his wand," Remus said, indicating the slim case.

"It's a proud day, and no denying it," she said approvingly. "Come on, come and have a bit of a sit down, you're just in time for tea. Irene, mind the shop, would you?" she asked, of a plump, friendly-looking woman behind the till, who nodded and turned to assist a customer.

"Business seems to be doing well," Sirius observed, as they made their way to the back of the shop.

"Oh, it's going really well -- I had to hire Irene when we expanded, just to help handle everything," Andromeda said. "Ted's been a dear, he does all the books -- Ted! Look who's here!" she called, as she led them through a door in one corner. Sirius vaguely recognised that they were passing from what once had been the enormous living room of Grimmauld Place, into the former dining room, now fitted with shelves and a giant desk behind which Ted sat doing figures.

"Lupin, Black, and Potter," Ted grinned, standing and circling the desk to shake hands all round. "Good to see you lot again. Welcome back! Has it been two years already? My god, look at you, Harry."

"Grown, hasn't he?" Sirius said proudly. "Going off to Hogwarts tomorrow."

"Well done, lad," Ted said cheerfully.

"I'm taking them upstairs for some tea, love, are you busy?" Andromeda asked, and Ted shook his head, following them up the flight of stairs to the next floor.

Sirius blinked as they ascended; this floor had been bedrooms and bathrooms, opening onto a dim, somewhat poky landing -- but Andromeda's renovations had been vigorous here as well, and now there was a wide open space at the top of the stairs, full of windows through which sun streamed brightly. To their left, a series of doors still appeared to lead into bedrooms -- one of them, slightly open, revealed a mess similar to the appearance of Harry's, back at the River House.

"Don't mind the disarray, that's Nev's room," Andromeda said, leading them through the living room and into an elegant dining room beyond the doorways, fixed up with what Sirius recognised as the old dining room table, refinished and polished to a bright shine. Andromeda slipped around

a low counter and into the kitchen, filling a teakettle and setting it on the counter along with a handful of cups. Ted took down a plate of shortbread as she brewed the tea, talking all the while.

"We went and bought Neville's school things yesterday -- Ted was that proud -- and he's hosting a couple of his friends tonight, since their parents had to go home. I think we're taking about five boys to the train tomorrow and picking up three more girls from the Leaky Cauldron on the way to the station."

"It's a nightmare," Ted said frankly, offering the plate to Harry, who took one and thanked him politely.

"Nymphadora's coming to help," Andromeda chided, adding cream and sugar to the tea-tray she was assembling. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Are you two staying the night?"

"Got a room at the Leaky Cauldron," Sirius said, as Andromeda set the tray on the table. Remus quietly moved his chair back a few inches, and Andromeda looked stricken.

"Oh -- Remus, I'd forgotten, I'm sorry -- a silver tea service, how careless of me," she groaned.

"It's all right, really -- as long as the cups are china," Remus protested, while Andromeda moved the tray to the furthest possible point from him, and poured from there. She added milk and sugar for Ted and herself, and glanced inquiringly at Sirius, who requested just a little milk.

"I did remember you take lemon," she said to Remus apologetically, passing him his cup with two slices of lemon in it.

"Really, Andromeda, it's quite all right," he reassured her, as Harry helped himself to a few spoonfuls of sugar. "You were saying, about Neville?"

"Oh, yes -- if you'd like us to take Harry to the train, one more at this point's no trouble," she said, with a smile for Harry.

"We'll take him," Sirius reassured her. "We've no need to leave anytime soon -- we're, er, we're moving up here, actually," he said. "Now that Harry's at Hogwarts, he's safe there, and Remus is itching to rejoin the wizarding world..."

"I missed magic," Remus said calmly.

"All right, so did I," Sirius agreed. "We're thinking London, or possibly Newcastle -- closer to Harry."

"Well, there's close and there's close," Ted said, thoughtfully. "Really, if you can Apparate the distance doesn't matter all that much. You'd be welcome here, you know, we just finished converting the attic -- there's only two bedrooms, but you...er...are moving up here...together, aren't you?" he asked delicately.

"We are," Remus replied, while Sirius blushed. "That would be ideal, really -- it's private, and close. We'd pay rent, of course."

"You'd have very understanding landlords," Andromeda said, with a grin. Just then there was the sound of a small herd of elephants coming up the stairs, which turned out to be in reality a small herd of eleven-year-olds: two fair-haired, tall boys, a smaller sly-looking one, and a round-faced, dark-haired boy who could only be Neville, two years older than the last time they'd seen him.

"Are we late for tea?" Neville asked, breathlessly, as the boys stopped uncertainly in the doorway. Andromeda waved them in, and gave Sirius an amused grin as she went to brew more. They ranged themselves out around the table while Ted introduced them.

"This is Seamus Finnegan -- you remember Brenda, don't you? Her lad -- and Zacharias Smith and Blaise Zabini, there, you can hardly tell they're cousins, they look more like twins -- and of course our Nev," Ted announced. "Lads, that's Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin, and this is Harry Potter."

"I remember you," Neville gave Harry a grin. "You gave me your pyjamas when I was in hospital."

"Cor, are you really Harry Potter?" Blaise asked, studying Harry interestedly.

"Let's see your scar then," Seamus said, equally as unsubtle.

"Manners, boys," Ted murmured, but Harry merely smiled and pushed his fringe off his forehead. Everyone looked suitably impressed as Andromeda passed around more tea.

"Did you get your wand yet?" Neville asked, and Harry nodded, showing him the case. "Cool. Want to see mine? We all got them, they're in my room. You can come see my room after tea if you like."

"After tea Harry has to get his robes," Andromeda scolded. At Neville's disappointed look, she relented. "Why don't you lads take your tea and go play in Neville's room, we'll call you when we're done."

All five boys beamed, and carefully carried their tea down the hallway, until their conversation was merely a commotion of incomprehensible childish voices.

"Bloomed a little, hasn't he?" Remus asked, and Andromeda put her face in her hands, laughing.

"Just you try shutting him up," Ted grinned. "Lately, anyway. He's talked about nothing but Hogwarts since he got his letter."

"Harry either," Sirius replied. "Bit of a weird feeling, really."

"Oh?" Andromeda asked. Sirius shrugged, and looked down at his tea.

"Well, I mean. Wasn't that long ago we were first years," he said.

"Twenty years," Remus murmured, with a smile.

"And, you know, here I am, having tea with other parents, talking about school clothes and the like..." Sirius waved a hand. "Makes me feel rather old, really."

"Wait till he leaves school, then you'll really feel old," Andromeda answered, sipping her tea. "It's good to see you again, both of you -- we've been worried about you, tucked away from the wizarding world, no real outside contact. I was very glad to get your letters, Sirius."

"We've done all right."

"Harry certainly seems happy and healthy," Ted observed.

"On the whole," Sirius agreed, "barring a broken leg and a couple of colds."

"Well, he's back where he belongs now," Andromeda said firmly. "And so are you."

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 3

Harry was deeply involved in a game of Gobstones -- watching, not playing, as apparently Zacharias and Seamus had a grudge match on -- when Sirius appeared in the doorway to summon him downstairs. Harry gathered up his wand and secured Snake around his neck, following Sirius and Andromeda down and out into the shop once more, where Andromeda helped him up onto a stool.

"Now then," she said, as another magical tape measure began its work. "Arms straight out, Harry, there's a lad..." she consulted a series of notations rapidly appearing on a sheet of parchment tacked to the wall, and walked to the racks nearby, taking down charcoal trousers, a white shirt, blue jumper, and plain black tie. "We didn't want to give Madam Malkin's too much competition, she's a good friend and she's been very good to us, so I've priced these a bit high -- sensible people will still buy from Madam Malkin, and we'll deal with the snobs who think costly is better," she said with a grin. "For you, however, free of charge. No, Sirius, let me give the boy a present. It isn't every day one starts Hogwarts, is it, Harry?"

Harry grinned. "No ma'am," he said, as the tape measure wrapped itself around his head, and Andromeda promptly fetched his hat.

There was a soft noise, almost a sigh, as someone entered the shop, and Andromeda glanced over her shoulder as a small, pale-haired boy peered carefully around, trailed by a house-elf, a trunk levitating in the air behind them. The boy looked exhausted, Harry thought, and on the verge of tears.

"You must be Draco," Andromeda said. "Right, Harry, just a minute..."

Harry glanced at Sirius, who had narrowed his eyes when Andromeda said the boy's name. She was crouched in front of him, studying his face.

"You look exhausted. Have you done all your shopping yourself?" she asked, and he nodded.

"Couldn't find your shop, at first," he mumbled. "Thought I might as well get all my things."

"Did your mum leave you in Diagon Alley?" Andromeda asked, shocked.

"She wouldn't go in the Leaky Cauldron," Draco said miserably. Andromeda gave the house-elf behind him a piercing look, and Harry watched in fascination as it cowered behind Draco's knees.

"I'm going to have words with your mum when next we speak," she said severely.

"Dobby is taking very good care of master Draco, miss," the house-elf said querulously.

"I'm sure you did, but a boy shouldn't be wandering around Diagon Alley with only a house-elf for chaperone -- don't you dare punish yourself in here, elf! That's an order! You take Draco's trunk upstairs, now, and Master Draco, let's fit you for your robes, then you can go upstairs too and have a lie-down, how's that?" Andromeda asked, kindly. "You hop up there, I'll just go make sure Dobby's arranged your things," she said, as she vanished once more into the back of the shop.

"Hi," Harry said, as the pale-haired boy climbed up on the stool next to him. Draco flinched when the tape measure began its attack, but held very still once he understood what it was doing. "I'm Harry."

"Draco Malfoy," the boy mumbled.

"It's exciting, isn't it?" Harry asked. "I've done all my shopping today too. Did you see Mr. Ollivander?"

Draco nodded.

"And Flourish and Blott's, isn't it the greatest place ever?"

This brought a shy smile to the boy's face. "Yeah, I never saw so many books in one place, except our library, and I'm not supposed to go in there..."

"Was that your very own house-elf?" Harry asked, jerking his head in the direction Dobby had gone.

"He takes care of me," Draco answered. "He's going home tonight. Aunt Andromeda's taking me to the train tomorrow. Is she nice?"

Harry gave him a quizzical look. "Don't you know her?"

"Mum asked her to take me because she doesn't like crowds. She doesn't like Aunt Andromeda much either," Draco said, mournfully. "But she likes crowds less."

"Draco," Sirius said, startling them both. Harry had forgotten his godfather was there, leaning against the wall next to the trouser racks. "You'd be named for your ancestor Draconis. Draconis Black."

Draco quailed at being addressed by the tall, dark-haired man. "Y-yes sir," he said, cautiously.

"That's my godfather Sirius," Harry said, belatedly. "He's taking me to the train."

Sirius came forward, planting himself in front of the two boys.

"Sirius Black?" Draco asked, in a small voice. Sirius nodded.

"Your mother is my cousin," Sirius said, and Harry blinked. This was the cousin's son Sirius talked about, the one who almost got the Black estates? Sirius gave the boy a wry smile. "If it wasn't for me, you'd own this building."

"Oh," Draco said, nearly panicking. "Oh -- "

"Calm down, lad, I don't bite. Much," Sirius added.

"My mum hates you!" Draco blurted, then looked terrified.

"Yes, I imagine she does," Sirius said with a small smile.

"Sirius, are you harassing my nephew?" Andromeda demanded, returning with a small plate on which sat some of the shortbread left over from tea. "Here you are, lad, no need to panic. His bark is worse than his bite," she added. Draco ate a piece of shortbread, eyes still wide with terror, while Andromeda threw a robe over Harry's head and a needle began to hem it automatically. She fetched more clothing, making a second, separate pile for Draco.

"I'm sure I don't know what your mum is thinking, owling me out of the blue after years and years, asking me to take you to the train when she's perfectly capable of doing it herself," Andromeda continued. "Not that I mind in the least -- I've been wondering if I'd ever get to meet you properly -- but it's very strange, isn't it?"

"Mum's very strange," Draco muttered under his breath, just before a robe descended over his head, too, and another needle began hemming it. Harry stifled a laugh.

"At any rate, you're here now," Andromeda said. "And there's Harry done."

Harry struggled out of his robe and watched as it remained in midair. Two more robes exactly like it floated down and the needle began its work on them. Andromeda winked at Harry, and kissed Sirius on the cheek.

"Remus is upstairs talking with Ted, apparently they're both interested in the new flying bicycles that Nimbus is trying to patent," she said. "You're welcome to stay to dinner, Sirius, if you like. We're already feeding eight, three more won't make that much difference."

"Can I, Sirius?" Harry asked. "Neville's got a wizard's chess set and I bet anything I can beat him -- "

"Go on then," Sirius said with a smile, giving Harry a little shove. "I'll nip down to the shops and see about getting something to help with dinner -- wine?" he asked Andromeda, who smiled and nodded as Harry wandered away. Harry glanced back over his shoulder to see Draco, still watching Sirius with amazed eyes, and wondered precisely what Draco's mum had taught him about Harry's godfather.

He seemed a bit of a wet blanket, Draco Malfoy. Not at all as interesting as Neville or as much fun as Seamus.

Dinner that night was a very lively affair; six boys, four parents, and one Cool Older Sister all gathered around the big dining room table, sharing (and occasionally, in Blaise and Harry's case, flinging) spaghetti and meatballs and garlic bread. Nymphadora showed off her Auror's badge and did funny faces on request, the grownups got mildly drunk on the excellent wine Sirius had procured, and Sirius taught the boys a mildly offensive alternative version of the Hogwarts school song. When Andromeda sent the other boys along to bed, they gathered up Harry's things and ambled up Diagon Alley to the Leaky Cauldron.

"One bed?" Remus asked, lifting an eyebrow when Sirius showed them the room he'd arranged for. Sirius grinned and, with a flick of his wand, transfigured a low bench by the window into a small bed.

"Mister Potter, your bedchamber," he said, bowing, and Harry bowed back, before unwrapping the package Andromeda had made up for him, which included some Hogwarts pyjamas. He went to put the rest in his trunk, and dropped it all on the floor when he lifted the lid and saw what was inside.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand," he cried, lifting the broomstick out of the trunk. He glanced at Sirius, who was looking smug, and set the broom down carefully before running to hug him around the waist.

"Lad can't start school without something special," Sirius said, ruffling Harry's hair. "There's a false bottom in the trunk where you can store it -- the trunk's charmed to expand to fit."

Harry carefully eased the broomstick back into the trunk, then took it out again.

"He's going to try to sleep with it," Remus stage-whispered to Sirius.

"Am not. I just want to look at it for a while," Harry said reverently, sitting on the small bed and running his hands over every inch of it, from bristles to logo. "It's great," he said. "Really great, Sirius."

"Only the best for our lad," Sirius said. Harry placed the broomstick in the trunk, then lowered the lid on the false bottom, and began cleaning up his clothing, packing them into it before adding his books on top, and his potions supplies in a fold-out compartment on the left. Remus and Sirius changed into pyjamas while he unpacked his backpack into the trunk as well -- more books, some art supplies and drawings, and, tucked carefully away, a worn plush frog. Remus saw one webbed foot poking out from under the Mabinogion before Harry closed the trunk's lid, and smiled.

There was an office, a desk, bookshelves, a kettle and a tin of tea-bags (which was peculiar in itself, as he never used tea-bags), an empty aquarium for some reason; his own hands, indubitably, the light dusting of brown hair across the knuckles, the small scar on his left wrist from where he'd cut himself long ago, before he'd been bitten.

He was placing papers in a suitcase on top of old, ragged clothing; packing hurriedly, some fear niggling in the back of his mind though he couldn't identify it when he tried. Instead he kept packing, until there was only one thing left on the desk, a folded piece of parchment with ragged edges.

He picked it up slowly and opened it, and the him that was him, and not simply a man packing as if his life depended on it, smiled. The Marauder's Map. Years since he'd seen it. When they graduated they'd passed it on to a couple of fourth years who'd had it confiscated, so they heard, around Easter the following year.

Someone knocked on the door, and he turned -- Harry. Standing in the doorway, Lily's eyes in James' face, watching him.

He'd done something -- failed Harry somehow. He could see it in Harry's face. Harry was saying something and he was replying, but he couldn't hear the words; all he could focus on was the look on Harry's face, the reproach. He tried to breathe and suddenly couldn't; tried to move and felt fixed in place.

Remus woke with a gasp, drawing air desperately into his lungs; just because werewolves could go without air for extended periods didn't mean they wanted to. He pushed himself up on one elbow, trying to slow the frantic beating of his heart, and realised he wasn't in their bright, booklined room at home; this was a room over the Leaky Cauldron, looking over Diagon Alley.

He rubbed his face with one hand. Next to him, in the bed, Sirius mumbled into his pillow and scooted closer, while Harry, in the other bed, let out a sigh and rolled over. The clock read just past six; too early to be up, but he knew he wouldn't manage any more sleep, and he might as well help them get an early start on the day.

Two years.

Two years he'd gone without the dreams, the unconscious visions so real he felt that there must be another Remus Lupin somewhere, living the life he saw when he slept. He had no doubt the lack was something to do with Betwys Beddau and the ring of standing stones that had once surrounded it. Still, he had hoped he was done with them forever.

He wandered down to the bathroom that the tenants of the Leaky Cauldron shared and washed himself, shaving carefully before returning to the room to put on decent clothing. He descended barefoot into the pub and asked the young woman behind the bar to send up breakfast in half an hour. She looked harried, but agreed cheerfully enough; he gave her his best Charming The Customers smile, learned from years of running a shop, and paid with tip in advance.

When he returned to the room, Harry was awake and sitting on his bed under the window that looked onto Diagon Alley, arms wrapped around his knees, forehead resting on the glass.

"Morning," Remus said, and Harry turned to give him a grin. "Breakfast in about half an hour. Train leaves at eleven; we'll be there well early, but that's just as well."

"I don't mind," Harry answered. "I can save a compartment for Neville and everyone."

"Do you want us to come onto the platform with you? I know I used to be heartily embarrassed when my dad came along," Remus said with a smile.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Harry said.

"Harry -- of course we want to. I'm worried Sirius is going to want to get on the train with you, that's all," he added, and Harry smiled.

"I'm glad you're taking me," he said quietly. "Imagine having to go buy all my things all alone, like Draco did. I would have, I bet, if the Dursleys still had me."

"Not the type to enjoy a trip to Diagon Alley, were they."

"Not by half," Harry agreed. "But..."

Remus lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, it would've been easier," Harry said quietly, chin resting on his knees. "Leaving the Dursleys, I mean. I miss Betwys Beddau already, and I don't really..." he sniffed. "What if I can't find my classes, or nobody likes me -- everyone knows each other already, Neville and Seamus and Zacharias and Blaise -- or I fail out all my classes?"

"Fancy James Potter's son failing anything," came a deep voice from behind them, and Sirius shifted on the bed, curling around Remus, chin resting on his shoulder. "Not to worry, pup, we have every faith in you."

"Yeah, I guess," Harry said, and Remus suddenly wished he did have the Marauder's Map; it was a reassuring tool that he sensed Harry could well have used.

"It'll be fine," Remus added. "You'd better get washed up, Harry, and by the time you're done, breakfast should be ready," he ordered, and Harry climbed off his bed reluctantly, wandering sleepily down the hall.

"Maybe he can take Padfoot with him," Sirius speculated.

"No, Pads," Remus answered. "He's got to go this one alone."

"Seems a shame, though."

"He'll be fine."

"You remember your first night in the dorms?"

"Vividly. You and James levitated water balloons at us. You filled mine with clotted cream, in fact."

"Right." Sirius sighed. "I'd forgotten. Sorry about that."

"Forgiven," Remus said, and graciously allowed Sirius to kiss him.

Between Sirius' fussing and Harry's forgetfulness, they were still nearly late getting to the train; Harry suffered his godfather and his whatever-Remus-was -- they'd never really established that, but Remus didn't seem to mind -- to kiss him and ruffle his hair and slip an extra Galleon or three into his pockets for the sandwich trolley. Sirius knelt as they were calling for all students to board the train, and looked Harry right in the eye.

"Remember lad, you're James Potter's son and Sirius Black's godson and you don't take any trouble from anyone," he said gravely. "You do well in your classes and make friends and if you get up to a bit of mischief, well, you come by it honestly."

Harry nodded soberly, and glanced up at Remus, who smiled and laid a hand on Sirius' shoulder.

"You'll be fine, pup," he said quietly, using the pet name that normally only Sirius used. "Owl us, will you?"

Another nod, and Sirius hugged him, nearly crushing Snake in the process, before giving him a gentle shove towards the train. Harry maneuvered his trunk through the crowd, distracted for a minute by the logistics of getting it up the stairs, and when he turned in the doorway he couldn't see them.

He bumped down the corridor, peering into compartments already crowded with children, until he reached the last one. In this one, there was only one occupant; Draco Malfoy, the fair-haired boy from the night before.

"Mind if I sit here?" Harry inquired, and Draco shrugged, gazing out the window. "Where'd everyone else go?"

"Blaise said there wasn't room in their compartment," Draco answered, carelessly. "He and Zacharias and Seamus and Neville all got a compartment, but Neville went off to find his tie, it fell off somewhere, and they pushed me out after he'd gone."

"Bastards," Harry said amiably, and Draco went pale. "What?"

"That's an awful word."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend," Harry answered haughtily, embarrassed by Draco's scolding tone. He looked out the window, scanning the thinning crowd for his godfather, and pointed when he saw him.

"Look, there's your Aunt Andromeda, and Sirius and Remus. Sirius said yesterday that they're going to move into the attic of Andromeda's house."

Draco looked indifferent, so Harry prattled on, mostly to hide his own anxiety; the pale boy across from him seemed unnaturally calm, in the face of

what was supposed to be the biggest adventure of their life. He waved goodbye to his godfather until the train had left the platform entirely, and then settled back against the seat, watching the outside world fly by.

It wasn't long before the door of the compartment rattled, and slid open; Neville's cheerful cherubic face peered around it.

"Hiya Harry," he said. "Hi Malfoy. I thought you were in with us."

"Got too crowded," Draco said offhandedly, and Harry -- who had pulled enough pranks at the village school in Betwys Beddau to appreciate a smooth liar -- gave him an admiring look. "Find your tie yet?"

"Not yet, but it's bound to turn up," Neville said. "We've looked everywhere else, mind if we sit with you for a while? Peaceful down this end of the carriage, isn't it?"

At Harry's inviting gesture, Neville pushed the door open fully and flopped down on the seat next to him, while a slightly taller, grave-looking girl lingered in the corridor.

"Come in then," Harry said. "You'll let in a draft."

The girl stepped inside, catching the door so it wouldn't slam, and held out her hand.

"Padma Patil," she said. "You're Harry Potter."

Harry grinned. "Want to see the scar?"

"Do show her, she didn't believe me when I said I had dinner with you," Neville complained. Padma settled herself composedly next to Draco, who watched her as if she were some sort of otherworldly creature. Harry pushed up his fringe, and Padma examined it interestedly.

"I always pictured it a bit more gory," she said critically. "It looks like a scratch that didn't heal properly."

"Oh, well, if you want gory..." Harry pulled his shirt-collar down, displaying the white, puckered gash across his collarbone where Peter Pettigrew had let his blood, two years before. "Neville's got one too, show yours, Nev," he said, and Neville showed off his own, nearly-identical scar with a grin.

Draco gave them an appreciative whistle.

"That's what I call a scar," Padma agreed. "Why didn't it heal properly? Didn't you have a Healer look at it?"

"S'magic," Neville replied. "Have you got any interesting scars?" he asked, glancing at Draco to include him. Draco shook his head, and Padma looked thoughtful.

"No," she said. "But I've got a bit of a dent in one leg where I fell off the kitchen ceiling once."

"Fell off the kitchen ceiling?" Draco asked. "Walk about on it often, do you?"

Padma lifted her chin haughtily. "If you don't want to hear about it I shan't tell it," she said.

"Do," Harry urged. "I want to hear. Neville does too, don't you?"

Neville nodded, and Padma relented. "Well, you know how, when you're little, you show magic?"

"I bounced," Neville sighed.

"I turned a teacher's wig blue," Harry agreed.

"I made a cat disappear," Draco said. They all paused momentarily. "What? They found it eventually, it was only a few miles away."

"Well, that's the way I showed magic. My sister set fire to things and I climbed walls."

The boys looked suitably impressed. "Can you still do it?" Neville asked interestedly. Padma stood on the train seat, rubbing her hands together.

"It doesn't always work, mind," she warned. She held her hands above her head, palms up, and jumped; her palms seemed to stick to the ceiling, and she dangled there for a moment before dropping again.

Harry glanced at Draco and Neville, who were looking suitably impressed, and he could tell they were thinking the same thing -- she's all right, for a girl. He saw Draco open his mouth to say it, but just then the trolley rolled by, and they all stood up to inspect its wares. Harry, who hadn't had wizarding sweets in years, bought a bit of everything; over pumpkin pasties and chocolate frogs they discussed Hogwarts, the train ride, the arrival, and the Sorting Hat -- which naturally turned the conversation towards Houses.

"Well, my mum and dad were both Gryffindor," Neville said, "So I guess I'll end up there. Haven't got the brains for Ravenclaw," he added frankly.

"I don't really care, so long as I don't have to share a room with my sister," Padma rolled her eyes. "Though I think it would be rather frightful to be in Hufflepuff. I hear nobody pays them any notice at all."

"It'd still be better than Slytherin," Draco said. "My whole family's gone Slytherin. I'm doomed to it."

"Slytherin isn't so horrible," Harry protested. "Professor Snape's their Head of House, he's all right. And Hufflepuff isn't ignored, they're just quiet."

"How d'you know?" Padma inquired. "You haven't got any siblings at Hogwarts."

Harry floundered for a minute. "Er -- well, Professor Snape is...my godfather and Professor Snape are..."

It would be a terrible lie to say they were friends, and while Harry wasn't against lying on principle, Sirius and Professor Snape being friends went against nature itself.

"...acquaintances. I used to visit Professor Snape at the school when I was younger," Harry finished.

"You know all about it then, don't you?" Neville asked. "Tell us what House you want to go into."

"Well, my parents were Gryffindor like yours," Harry said slowly. "So I reckon there's a chance there. I don't think I'd much fancy being a Ravenclaw, and I'm not patient enough to be a Hufflepuff. Wouldn't half-mind Slytherin, really, I like snakes, and I like Professor Snape. What about you, Draco?" he asked, because Draco had gone silent, and looked thoughtful.

"Don't know," he said, indifferently. "Won't know until we get there. Doesn't matter where I want to go anyway, Malfoys are Slytherins. Always have been, always will be."

"Sirius said most Blacks were Slytherins too," Harry argued. "But he wasn't."

"Andromeda neither," Neville put in. "And she's your aunt. She told me she was glad because her sisters both got put in Slytherin and she didn't think they were very nice -- " he stopped short, and clamped his jaw shut; Harry saw tension building in his shoulders.

"Well, she's not," Draco murmured.

"All right then, here's what we'll do," Harry said brightly, in his best Remus Distracting Sirius From Something Unpleasant voice. "We'll make a pact here and now. No matter what House we go into, we'll look after each other. Nobody picks on Draco -- " this was an obvious concern for all of them, especially Draco himself, " -- and nobody makes fun if anyone goes into Hufflepuff, and if we end up in the same House as one another we'll share notes and all. Might as well do anyway," he mused. "We'll be our own House."

He spat on his hand and held it out to Padma, who looked doubtful.

"I'm not going to spit-shake," she said. "Mum says it's not hygienic."

"Mine too," Draco chimed in. Harry glanced at Neville and rolled his eyes, then wiped his hand off, picked up a chocolate frog box, and pulled out the collector's card.

"Look, see? Dumbledore," he said, holding it up. "It's a sign."

Draco gasped as Harry ripped it neatly into four pieces. Neville took his easily enough, grinning as half of Dumbledore's hat and a bit of his ear waggled humourously in the photo; Padma giggled as she took hers, and Draco reluctantly accepted his quarter, which had Dumbledore's left armpit and most of his beard.

"Now it's like in pirate stories, everyone has a bit of the treasure map and we're all brothers," Harry announced. "And sister," he added, when Padma cleared her throat.

"So what do we call ourselves?" Neville asked, joining the spirit of the game. Harry shrugged.

"We'll make something up in a bit," he said complacently. The train clacked along, the scenery whizzed past, and he had a full stomach of sweets and pumpkin pasty; in a few hours they'd be at Hogwarts, and they'd see where they were going to spend the next seven years. Now that he'd already made three friends, a little of the fear and homesickness was receding, replaced by a fluttering but almost pleasant anxiety over where he was to be sorted.

All in all, even if Padma was a bit stuck up and Draco unrelenting in his wet-blanketness, it was turning out to be a pretty good train ride.

Most of the professors at Hogwarts school spent the final day before the arrival of the students arranging their classrooms, going over their notes, and re-checking their student rosters. It was a soothing habit that well-hid the anxiety even the adults felt, with every new school year. Severus himself generally spent the time cleaning the Potions cabinets and sorting any disarrayed paperwork; he was by nature and neurosis a tidy man, though he necessarily tolerated mess, as it was a rare class indeed where someone didn't spill ingredients, stain robes, or blow something up.

That particular year, however, he found the cleaning didn't soothe him; the papers didn't get any neater no matter how often he reshuffled them, and the jars all looked badly-organised in their racks on the supply cabinet shelf. He had never been so out of sorts over an arrival before. There was always some anticipation when the children were returning, but after a perfunctory cleaning he'd usually simply wrapped himself up in his studies and his books, ignoring it until it was time to go down to the feast.

Even Minerva McGonagall, passing him in the hallway as she was returning from lunch and he, too restless to eat, was on his way to the library to check a reference in one of his lectures, remarked on the tension in his face, asking him if he was ill. Normally, McGonagall not being known for her particular tenderness of feeling, he would have been startled by the question. Instead, he growled a reply, and resumed his pacing of the corridors.

Tonight, Harry would be here. He hadn't seen the boy in far too long; it had been two years since Harry and his godfather and that abominably good-natured werewolf had gone into hiding. True, he was their secret-keeper, and the temptation to simply appear on their doorstep some evening had been great, especially on days when his classes went badly, or he caught people staring curiously at the mark on his face near his right eye, or his usually busy mind sank into something which a less-repressed man might have called depression. He hadn't known how lonely he -

Well, there was no use brooding upon it, not -- he glanced at the clock on the mantel of his sitting-room, -- not when it was time to go down to the feast.

Severus Snape did not run, as a rule, but he hurried down the hallway, cursing himself for having let time slip away; one minute it seemed to drag, the next it seemed to fly. He arrived just as the First-Years did, led by McGonagall. Dumbledore glanced over at him hesitating in the doorway, and winked, waving him on.

With as much dignity as he could gather, he crossed behind the high table, and settled into his seat. He found himself scanning the line of children, eagerly, until a dark head lifted and bright green eyes met his.

Harry saw him and blinked, and then glanced around; self-consciously, he raised a hand and waved. He was taller than he had been, which was augmented by the plain Hogwarts robes, and the last traces of childish roundness had left his face. He was sun-browned, his hair grown rather long and shaggy, and there were definite hints of cleverness in his eyes, a more adult intelligence he hadn't possessed as a guileless eight-year-old. He looked very much like James had at his age, but Severus barely thought on that; he hadn't really linked James and Harry since their first visit together, and Harry was quite his own person already.

Severus, in reply to the waved greeting, inclined his head just enough for Harry to see, and was rewarded with a brilliant grin. He fought his own smile -- a first impression of a kindly, beaming fool was not what he wanted to make on the rest of the children -- and watched as Harry glanced around. Severus saw Oliver Wood do a double take, and the Weasley brood hollered across at him, and their own brother -- Merlin, not another one, had no-one introduced Arthur Weasley to the concept of a prophylactic? -- who had collared Harry now and was speaking excitedly with him.

McGonagall was calling for silence, however, and he kept an eye on the Slytherin table, making sure no-one was being troublesome, while he waited for the names to be called. He let them roll over him without paying too much attention -- Abbot, Bones, Boot, Brocklehurst; Finnegan, Goldstein, Goyle, Granger.

He heard Longbottom called, and watched Neville timidly approach the Hat; the boy gave him an anxious look, but also a wink of recognition that would have outraged his sensibilities if it wasn't, well, Neville. A social maladjust, that boy, no matter what Andromeda had done for him. Nymphadora Tonks had been the same way, though without the utter presumption of familiarity Neville had just shown.

"Gryffindor!" the Hat shouted, and Severus murmured "Surprise," to himself as Neville hopped down and dashed over to the Gryffindor table, giving Harry and an unfamiliar boy pats on the shoulder as he passed. The second boy had pale, white-blond hair, and a somewhat sickly pallor --

"MacDougal, Morag!" "Ravenclaw!"

-- as though he didn't get out in the sun enough; then again, most of the students were pale with anxiety.

"Macmillian, Ernie!" "Hufflepuff!"

There was something about the face, though.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

Severus glanced up sharply at McGonagall as she called the name, and the pale-haired boy stepped forward. Lucius and Narcissa's son, then. A murmur went around the room at the name, and the boy seemed to pull in on himself. His name had already done him no favours; these children had grown up on stories of James and Lily Potter, You-Know-Who, Peter Pettigrew and Lucius Malfoy. Two years ago, the Malfoy name had been all over the papers -- with the seeming return-to-life of Pettigrew, some of Lucius' old cronies had called for his release on the grounds that Peter had killed all those Muggles, but the Ministry had stood firm; Lucius Malfoy was still a Death Eater, and insane, besides.

Despite the whispering and the embarrassed slouch of his shoulders, young Draco's face was carefully schooled to blankness as he approached the stool, and he didn't flinch as some did, when the Hat was set on his head.

There was a long silence, broken only by the occasional murmurings of the Hat in Draco's ear. It almost seemed to be arguing with the boy, until finally it gave a distinctly dissatisfied rustle and called out "Hufflepuff!"

Draco pulled it off, leapt down from the stool and nearly bolted off the platform to the Hufflepuff table. He did not receive the warm welcome Neville'd had at Gryffindor.

More names were called, as the students began to look rather hungry and Severus felt his own stomach churn with a combination of emptiness and nervousness. Nott's boy, Theodore, went into Slytherin, as did Pansy Parkinson; the Patil twins looked relieved to be split up, Parvati to Gryffindor and Padma to Ravenclaw -- indeed, he'd never seen sisters look so happy to be split up.

Severus leaned forward as Sally-Anne Perks left the chair. Soon, now...

And then McGonagall's voice again, tone entirely unchanged.

"Potter, Harry!"

There was another ripple of murmuring that ran around the hall as the boy stepped forward, beamed a wide grin at Dumbledore and himself, and sat confidently on the stool. The hat was lowered over his head, and as with Draco, soft mutterings could be heard; Severus strained to make them out, but the Hat kept its secrets close.

After a moment, and just when the silence in the room became oppressive, it shouted, clear and loud, a single word.

The rest of the professors looked stunned, as did the majority of the students -- Neville Longbottom and the Weasley brothers included.

Severus Snape smiled.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 4

Dear Harry,

Well, if I wasn't already going grey, I'd be able to send you a picture of myself to show off all the new grey hairs Sirius has given me. Between the trip back to Andromeda's, the day spent calming Sirius' fretting and listening to him pepper me with worries about you having forgotten or lost something -- you haven't, have you? You've only to say the word and it'll be in the post -- and the Prophet (see attached), I'm a wreck!

Nobody's mad at you, of course, in any way, and there's no shame in being a Slytherin. Some of the most powerful wizards in history have been Slytherins, and not all of them have been bad. Remember that yours is a house of ambition, not necessarily amorality. It's possible to want great things and still be a strong, brave, honest boy -- as I know you to be.

Listen, I don't know what Sirius has written to you, and I didn't ask. Just remember that if he overreacts, it's because he loves you and wants you to be happy at Hogwarts, and because he's sometimes an ignorant git. There's a reason Padfoot is a large, droolsome dog, Harry.

Make friends, do well, study hard, and stick with Neville, despite the Sorting. I have a feeling he'll need you, and it never hurts to have a Gryffindor in your corner in a pinch. And if you're hungry, find the painting of the bowl-of-fruit and tickle the pear. Don't be afraid of the house-elves, they like to help.

Write soon.

From the old grey Hogwarts boy, feeling older by the day,

Remus

Remus looked up from the letter he was finishing, and watched as Sirius -- unshaved, pyjama-clad, and cranky-looking -- entered the kitchen at 12 Grimmauld Place. Having returned to the Wizarding world, they were loathe to leave it, and Andromeda had offered them a few days' housing before they took the train back to Wales, to pack up the River House. Last night, after the evening Prophet with the list of all the new students and their Houses was published, Sirius had ranted for a good solid hour about Slytherins and their sneaky ways and how no godson of his was going to be one, until Remus had given in and shouted.

It was something he never did, making it a rare reserve weapon that usually got results. It had shut Sirius up, though it hadn't done anything for his mood; still, Remus thought with a fond grin, there were worse ways to end the evening than rough, angry sex. Besides, Sirius wasn't angry at him, so where was the harm?

Sirius was going to like this morning's Prophet even less.

The dark-haired man charmed himself a bowl of oatmeal, perfectly heated despite two years without a wand, and sat at the table, sullenly sprinkling brown sugar on it. Remus wondered if Andromeda still had any of Harrison's Wondrous Eggs, little candy eggs that hatched, when mixed into oatmeal and doused with milk, into sweet sugar dragons that wandered around the bowl until they were eaten. Sirius looked as if he could use a few.

"Morning," Sirius grunted.

"Morning," Remus answered. "You look a mess."

"Thanks."

"Well, you do."

Sirius glared, and Remus' sense of mischief, which was less obvious than Sirius' or James' but often more wicked, made him say something he knew was probably only going to get him into trouble.

"You ought to wash up and shave," he said, tossing the newspaper across the table. "You don't want to lose your reputation."

"Reputation?" Sirius asked. Remus tapped the paper, which was folded to the society pages.

The headline on the page read HANDSOME BACHELOR BLACK RETURNS TO LONDON and, in smaller letters, Potter To Attend Hogwarts As Godfather Is Spotted In Diagon Alley. There was a nice, lengthy article below it, and a photograph of Sirius crouched in front of Harry on Platform 9 3/4, with Remus standing nearby.

Sirius choked on his oatmeal so hard that Remus worried medical measures might be necessary, but when he recovered his voice was more than clear.

"I'LL HEX HER INTO NEXT WEEK!" he shouted, picking up the paper and slamming it on the table. "How dare they photograph my godson! Where are the Prophet offices? I'll go down there right now -- "

"Not in your pyjamas you won't, unless you want to make the actual front page of this evening's edition," Remus said, fighting a smile that was threatening to break through his composure. "Black Menaces Journalist In Sleepwear."

"Fine, I'll get dressed -- it's not funny, Moony! -- and go lodge a complaint. First I'm going to get her fired and then I'm going to make her life an absolute hell -- "

"Look!" Remus said cheerfully, pointing to the caption on the photograph. "I've been reduced to servitude. Farewell on the platform; left to right, Sirius Black, his unidentified valet, and Harry Potter, on Platform 9 3/4."

Sirius, meanwhile, was reading the article itself, muttering the words under his breath until he reached --

"Sirius Black may, after his return from seclusion, be considered the Wizarding World's most eligible bachelor," he read, stunned. "The handsome and wealthy scion of the ancient and noble house of Black is reportedly single. Not for long, however, with wealth, looks, and a knack with small children, evident by his obvious talent with his godson Harry Potter, whose adoring gaze never left his godfather's face until they were parted by the Hogwarts Express -- "

"Drivel," Remus drawled. "Reads like a bad novel."

"Look, there's a whole opinion piece on Harry going into Slytherin, too..." Sirius groaned, sinking into the chair.

"Nothing at all nasty, though, thank goodness. At least someone on the Prophet staff has a sense of propriety. This Skeeter woman's just shameless," Remus tapped the article with his quill. "I'm attaching a copy of the article to my letter to Harry. He'll find it hilarious, I'm sure."

"It's not funny," Sirius sulked. "They've no right at all to do that to Harry. Did you send my letter?"

"It's in my pocket, I'll send it out on the morning post with mine," Remus replied calmly.

"Add onto yours that in case I end in Azkaban for killing Rita Skeeter, I love Harry and I leave all my favourite books to him, since Remus Lupin is a heartless bastard who laughs at his friends when they're written up in the paper," Sirius said sourly.

"It is a bit funny, Sirius, come on," Remus protested. "There's no actual libel in it, and you shouting at some hack society columnist is only going to make more news to put in the paper."

"Are you saying I should just let her say these things?" Sirius demanded.

"They're very flattering things."

"Not about you, they called you a valet!"

"I don't care. Would you rather they called me your lover?"

Sirius wrinkled his nose at the term, and Remus grinned.

"Thought not. Are you going to eat that oatmeal?"

Sirius looked down at it, and then picked up a spoon and slowly stirred the brown sugar into the cereal. He ate a few bites in sullen silence.

"I thought I'd only have to worry about Peter getting to him," he sighed.

"Seems Peter's the least of our worries, if you listen to Severus Snape. Those clippings he sent all say the same thing. Peter Pettigrew, apparently alive, only seen by a very few people, no word since. They had to give Severus veritaserum before they'd even believe him."

"Peter didn't die," Sirius declared.

"I know that."

Sirius smoothed the oatmeal with his spoon, then took another bite. "I suppose it's flattering, in an awful sort of way."

"They do say you're very handsome."

"And I guess if I have to go punch everyone who writes an opinion piece on Harry, it's going to go very ill for me."

"Ignore them."

"Harry won't."

"He'll have to. He's famous, Sirius, there's no getting around that. Besides, how much trouble can he get into at Hogwarts?"

"Do you remember your troublemaking career at Hogwarts?" said Andromeda, from the doorway. She walked into the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea, and leaned on the counter. "Worried about Harry?"

Sirius held up the newspaper, and Andromeda giggled into her teacup.

"You of all people should know how much mischief can be had at Hogwarts," she scolded.

"Not that sort of trouble, I'm afraid," Remus sighed.

"Well, if it gets too bad we'll hire him a publicist," Andromeda said with a grin. "Do stop to draw breath between temper tantrums, Sirius."

"Yes, you'll need it for beating the women away with a stick," Remus grinned.

"Who reads the society pages anyway," Sirius grumbled, into his oatmeal.

Harry woke, his first day in the Slytherin dormitories, to the absolute silence of four other sleeping boys, and the first rays of sunlight filtering in through the high, narrow windows that looked out on ground level of the castle. He'd only briefly been in the Slytherin dorms before, but he knew the general layout; unlike Gryffindor Tower, where the dormitories were stacked one on top of another, the Slytherin Dungeons (what a charming name! he could hear Sirius say) were a byzantine sprawl of rooms and corridors, lit only by windows which were barely visible from the grounds. Harry rather liked the maze of oddly-shaped hallways and irregularly-sized rooms.

He glanced at the ancient clock over the room's fireplace, and saw that it was only five-thirty; he'd picked up the early-rising habit from Remus, and clearly the other students...hadn't.

Blaise Zabini was in with him, as was a smallish boy by the name of Theodore and two hulking hoodlum-looking types named Crabbe and Goyle. Harry wasn't overly pleased with the majority of his new House-fellows, since Crabbe and Goyle seemed a bit dim and Blaise and Theodore rather mean, but no doubt they'd grow on him.

He tossed the covers back and stumbled into the bathroom to wash, emerging to find Snake creeping slowly around the banister of Blaise's bed. Scolding quietly in Parseltongue, he lifted Snake around his shoulders and kept up a near-silent monologue to the small, sleepy creature as he dressed.

Where are the big ones? Snake asked. This place tastes different.

You'll get used to it, Harry answered. Snake was a little smarter than the last snake Harry had kept as a pet, and mischevious to boot. He'd have to have a talk with him about creeping up on sleeping dorm-mates and the possibility of having one's tail smashed in a panic.

I always do, Snake answered calmly. Harry held up his tie -- formerly plain black, now striped with green and silver -- and put it on. Why are you here with all these littler ones?

I told you, it's called school, Harry replied, smoothing his Hogwarts robe and unpacking a few books, putting them into the little shelf at the foot of his bed so that he could reach his new shoes.

Have the big ones gotten rid of you? Snake teased.

You're not too big to be fed to Professor Snape's python, Harry replied.

Don't I protect you? Snake asked, and Harry smiled indulgently. Don't I tell you when there are Bad Tastes? They taste bad, he added, swinging his head around to fix his eyes on Crabbe and Goyle. Bad littler ones.

Harry stroked Snake's head, soothingly. They're my burrowmates, he explained, as he worked at a bit of loose skin just behind Snake's head. You're shedding, he observed. Do you want to go outside? There's some nice itchy gravel in the flowerbeds.

I want to come with you today, Snake answered. I like the way this Indoors tastes.

Suit yourself, Harry said, quickly, because Theodore was stirring.

You don't want the littler ones to know you talk to me, do you? Snake asked. Harry made sure Theodore was snoring again before he replied.

They might think I was strange. Abnormal, Harry answered.

Aren't you? You're the only one I know who talks to me, Snake said reasonably. Harry felt the coils around his neck tighten just a little, an affectionate gesture.

I want them to like me.

And they won't like you if you talk to me?

They might not.

Stupid humans.

Harry laughed, softly.

You won't stop talking to me, will you? Snake asked, nervously. Harry stroked his sleek head reassuringly.

Of course not. It'll be like at the old school. We'll talk when we're alone.

Snake made the serpentine equivalent of a relieved sigh and coiled his way into a pocket in Harry's shirt, a warm weight against his chest as Harry tossed the black robe over his head. He took out his book bag, stocking it with quills and an inkpot before adding several tightly-wound brand-new rolls of parchment and carefully placing his wand in the special pocket on the outside flap. He added his textbooks for the day and a handful of the sweets Sirius had slipped into his trunk, then buckled the flap over them and reaching out to close his trunk.

One of his old plush frog's flippers was sticking out, and he gently freed the soft toy, laying it on top of his spare robes. There was a slight difference in the colour and texture of the fur, where Remus had repaired it the day they took him away from the Dursleys. Next to the frog lay the copy of the Mabinogion inscribed to him by Professor Snape, and after a moment's hesitation he picked it up and added it to his bag. If nothing else, it was a pleasant, secure weight on his shoulder.

He wondered, for a moment, if things would have been different if he'd stayed with the Dursleys. Well, obviously; he wouldn't have lived the last two years at the River House, or have the long shallow scar where Peter Pettigrew had drawn his blood. He probably wouldn't know who he was, or who Lord Voldemort was, or any of it; he mightn't have even gone to Hogwarts. The Dursleys might have forbade it.

He wandered out to the Common Room, which was also empty this early in the morning, and got his first really proper look at it; there was a long study table in the center of the room, and several old portraits and tapestries hanging on the walls, which were oddly-shaped, with lots of pleasantly cozy-looking nooks and crannies to explore, when he had the time. The deep green rug was thick under his feet, and ancient banners hung from the low rafters.

He smiled and gave the portrait near the door a wave as he left, and she giggled something about first-years as the door closed behind him. From here it was straight ahead and then two lefts to get to the stairs --

He nearly ran into Professor Snape, distracted as he was by remembering how to get up to the main hallway, when the man stepped out of his quarters. They stared at each other in surprise for a minute, and then Harry felt his face redden as he looked away.

"Hello, Harry," Professor Snape said quietly.

"Professor Snape," Harry mumbled. He was unsure why he should be embarrassed; perhaps because he wasn't a child anymore, but a student, and he couldn't hold his arms out for a hug as he wanted to.

"Did you sleep well?" the tall man inquired.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered.

"You're awake rather early."

"I usually am," Harry ventured, and saw the corners of Snape's mouth twitch upwards, slightly.

"A good habit to cultivate. Breakfast should begin soon," Snape observed. "I am walking that way myself."

Harry fell into step a little behind the tall professor as they wound their way through the corridors and up the stairs, out into the more brightly-lit ground floor of Hogwarts. The Great Hall was quite close and, at the doorway, Snape paused.

"It does not do to seem too familiar with one's professors, this early," he said, still in that quiet, subdued tone. "You and I have much to discuss, I believe, but we should wait for a while, first. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry nodded, though he wasn't sure if he did; the words did call to mind vague memories of various children being taunted in the schoolyard as a teacher's pet or a kiss-up.

"Within the classroom, do not expect preferential treatment. I do not believe you would, at any rate."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"In a few weeks' time, I should like to speak with you in my quarters. Until then, Mr. Potter," he added, and passed into the Hall through the entrance nearest the high teachers' table. Harry pondered for a moment, then deliberately wandered down to the other end of the corridor and entered through another door entirely.

It was early, very early, but breakfast was already waiting under shining silver covers. Harry lifted one and helped himself to waffles and bacon, then dug out some parchment and his quill and ink to write a letter to Remus and Sirius as he ate. There were only two students beside himself at the Slytherin table, though the other tables were slightly more crowded, mostly with first years who looked as anxious as himself. Professor Snape was sitting with Professor McGonagall, who was showing him something written on a parchment, while Headmaster Dumbledore talked amiably at Professor Quirrell, who was slowly stuttering out a reply.

Harry turned to his parchment.

Dear Sirius and Remus,

I guess you heard by now that I'm in Slytherin since Marcus Flint told me they publish the lists in the papers. Its all right though I think the other Slytherins are sort of strange, don't ask me how. Snake says Crabbe and Goyle are bad but they look like they're really just not very bright. Thats a horrible thing to say I guess. But they really do!

Hogwarts is like you said it would be Sirius, only even better, theres all sorts of interesting things to do. I don't reckon I'll go exploring in the Forbidden Forest like you used to but everyone wants to know whats in the third-floor corridor on the right hand side because Headmaster Dumbledore said it was out of bounds. I heard some of the older kids have already gone up and given it a good looking-at and dared each other to touch the doorway but the doors locked and probably hexed, so I shan't.

My beds pretty nice and the common room is cool. Breakfast is good though the waffles aren't as good as the ones Sirius makes on account of not having chocolate chips in them. I miss you and the River House, but theres lots of kids here and I've already made friends with Neville and Draco and a girl named Padma, who has a twin sister whose in Gryffindor, but Padmas in Ravenclaw. I'm writing this at breakfast but I guess I'll write another letter after dinner to let you know how classes went.

Harry paused, wondering what to write next, and looked up. He was just reaching for the inkpot again when he heard his name shouted, and Draco Malfoy ran down the aisle, skidding to a stop in front of him.

"Look, Harry!" he cried, as Harry turned to regard the smaller boy. He spread his arms and spun around. Harry lifted an eyebrow like Remus did when he was confused and didn't want to show it.

"You...got your robe on okay?" he asked.

"I'm a Hufflepuff!" Malfoy said joyfully.

The eyebrow inched up a little. "Did you, er, want to be a Hufflepuff?"

"Oh yeah, ever since I heard on the train that people don't mind them -- the Hat made a big fuss, said all Malfoys went into Slytherin and that I was sure to catch hell if I didn't, but I said I'd rather be Hufflepuff thanks, and we argued about it for a while, and then the Hat said fine and on my own head be it and look! My tie is YELLOW!"

Harry grinned at Draco's obvious pleasure, and offered him a waffle, which Draco took and nibbled as he sat next to Harry. "What're you writing?" he asked interestedly.

"Letter to my godfather and Remus," Harry replied. "If you think you'll get hell for being a Hufflepuff, just wait till Sirius finds out I'm in Slytherin. He hates Slytherin cos his whole family went there." Harry paused. "But I guess you knew that."

Draco nodded absently. "Will he shout?" he asked. "He might send you a Howler. I think Mum might send me one, except she'd have to go out and have it specially made and she hates going out, so maybe not. She might make our house-elf Mendy do it, but Mendy'd find a way to send me a regular letter instead. She likes me."

"Nah. Sirius isn't like that. Well, not with me. He never shouts at me," Harry answered. He unfolded a copy of his class schedule and began noting it down in the letter for Sirius and Remus to read.

"Not ever?" Draco asked, still nibbling the waffle.

"Not really. He shouted at me when I broke my leg but he said later he wasn't really angry at me, he was just scared and angry at himself cos he was supposed to be watching me," Harry shrugged.

"How did you break your leg?"

"Fell out of a tree."

Draco's eyes widened. Just then, Neville appeared on the other side of the table, and thumped down on the bench across from them.

"Wotcha, Harry! Hi Draco," he said, helping himself to scrambled eggs and toast.

"Hi Neville," Harry and Draco chorused, as Neville began making a very tidy scrambled egg sandwich. "Sleep well?" Harry asked.

"Not a wink," Neville answered cheerfully. "I couldn't think about anything but classes and how scary all the teachers looked last night. Professor McGonagall looks frightfully mean, don't you think?"

"I hear she can turn into a cat," Draco whispered conspiratorially.

"She's an Animagus," Harry put in.

"Well, anyhow, I found my tie so that's something, and I reckon if Nymphadora can get through seven years here, I can," Neville said, around a mouthful of egg and toast. "Look, there's Padma. Oi! Padma!" he called, and the dark-haired girl with the blue bow tied around her braid turned to find them.

"What're you doing here? This is the Slytherin table!" she said. Neville offered her a slice of toast.

"Nobody's here," Draco pointed out. "It's not like we're stealing anyone's seats."

"It doesn't matter! Houses aren't supposed to eat together. Especially Slytherin -- Penelope Clearwater told me they're very particular. Sorry Harry," she added, when Harry gave her a dark look.

"Well, I'm not particular," he said loftily. "Go on Padma, sit down, nobody cares."

Padma sighed and dropped into the seat next to Neville, who gallantly dumped a helping of scrambled egg onto her plate while she fixed herself some oatmeal. Draco finished nibbling his waffle to death and started on a sausage.

"Letter home?" Padma asked, indicating Harry's parchment. "I wrote mine last night, but I've no idea where the Owlery is."

"I'll take it for you," Harry volunteered. "Just finishing copying out my schedule for them, then I'm done, I think."

"Ta," Padma answered.

"Schedules out then," Neville announced, "Let's see what everyone's got."

Padma took out a little card she'd apparently copied her schedule onto, and Harry gave his to Neville once he'd finished writing down the last course. Draco pulled a rather tattered, crumpled sheet of parchment out of his pocket, which earned him a disapproving look from Padma, who at once took out another card and stole Harry's quill to copy down Draco's schedule with.

"Look, most of the classes are doubled up, so we'll always have someone or another in class with us," Neville said. "I've got Harry in Potions and Draco's got me in History of Magic, and Padma and Harry are together for Transfiguration -- "

"We've got Thursday night Astronomy together," Padma added, to Draco.

" -- and then it's me-and-Padma and Draco-and-Harry for Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Draco made a small panicked noise at the mention of Dark Arts, and took a quick drink of pumpkin juice.

"Yeah, scares me too," Neville answered. "Professor Quirrell looks nice, though."

"I've met him," Harry said. "He stutters."

"So do I, when I'm scared," Neville answered.

"I'm not afraid at all," Padma said, passing the neatly-copied card to Draco, who gave her a shyly pleased look before putting it in his breast pocket.

"Me either," Harry agreed. "I think it's brilliant."

"What, not even a little?" Neville inquired. "I'm terrified and Malfoy looks like he might be ill."

"I do not," Draco protested weakly, and as if to prove it, took a large bite of his sausage.

"You don't sound scared," Padma pointed out to Neville.

"Well, that's the trick, isn't it?" Neville answered. "If you talk loud enough about how scared you are you end up less scared."

Padma rolled her eyes and bit into her eggs, as more people began to pour into the Great Hall.

"Look, there's the prefect, we'd better hop," she said, and Harry wondered how she already knew who was his House prefect when he himself was unsure. Draco scuttled over to Hufflepuff, leaving some sausage behind, while Neville hurried almost as quickly to Gryffindor, and Padma walked with dignity, and her plate, to Ravenclaw.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 5

Except for a brief, five-month period at Molly Weasley's small home-school, studying with her children, Harry had always attended Muggle school; first the horrible place the Dursleys sent him to, where he was bullied and ostracised by Dudley's gang, and then the little village school at Betwys Beddau, where he was considered an outsider, but at least not ganged up on or completely left out.

He'd liked the village school, though it wasn't terribly challenging, since Remus and Sirius were intelligent people, who assumed Harry was also (a nice change from most adults) and had made sure that, whatever they did, Harry learned something. This did result in his being a little more advanced than many of the other children of Betwys Beddau, and made him all the more eager for Hogwarts, where he'd be learning what Sirius called proper lessons -- Sirius didn't hold much with Muggle views on some subjects, and had already been teaching Harry basic Arithmancy when the rest of his classmates were stuck in long-division. Harry might not understand Arithmancy as thoroughly as he did long-division, but magic was much more interesting and challenging than boring Muggle school, and Harry was impatient to start learning real, physical magic at Hogwarts.

He just hadn't expected to be one of the lessons.

In his first week at school, it was not just the students who were fascinated by him, but the professors, as well. Some were more subtle than others. In their first Astronomy lesson, that Wednesday night at midnight up in the highest tower, everything had seemed remarkably normal, at least by Hogwarts standards.

"Let's begin with a basic survey," Professor Sinistra had said. "What stars and constellations can you name?"

Hermione Granger's hand went up first, and she reeled off three constellations and their significances in one breath, before Sinistra could gently stop her and call on Neville, who had not raised his hand but bravely pointed out Polaris, the north star. Nott managed to murmur something to Crabbe, when he was called on, and then Sinistra turned her eyes on Harry, who raised his hand before he could be caught not-raising-it, and pointed upwards.

"That's Sirius," he said. There was a quiet murmur. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, "It's the first star I learned."

"I imagine your godfather taught it to you?" Sinistra asked, with a slightly misty look, like the older Slytherin girls got when Oliver Wood passed by.

"Er...yes, Professor," Harry answered.

"Did you stargaze frequently?"

Harry glanced around. Everyone was staring, except Neville, who was still working out which star Harry had pointed to.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. They had gone stargazing, in Wales, though mostly it consisted of Harry using a small telescope and reading books about constellations by flashlight, while Sirius and Remus shared a blanket and a flask nearby. Sinistra went on to pump the whole mythological story of the Dog Star and its accompanying constellation out of him, making what he suspected were sly comments on his godfather, until finally Neville butted in with a question, to save him.

It was almost worse in History of Magic, where Professor Binns gave a lecture on You Know Who -- Harry had to bite his tongue to keep from saying Voldemort, since Sirius and Remus had always followed Headmaster Dumbledore's example and called him by his name, on the rare occasions it was necessary to mention him -- before discussing with them the technique for studying history, using Harry as an example. And he still managed to make the whole thing boring, even for Harry.

In Charms, Professor Flitwick lectured on cosmetic covering charms "good for covering spots, boils, and scars, even magical ones" while never actually looking directly at Harry. Ron, who was less awed by Harry's reputation, having known him from Molly's school, drew funny pictures of the professor while Neville, on Harry's other side, was a wonderful distraction as he buggered up every charm he tried, thoroughly but cheerfully. Blaise glared at Harry from across the room as though he were a traitor for consorting with Gryffindors, but then Blaise was stuck with the Slytherin girls, as Crabbe and Goyle had attached themselves to Theo Nott, who was marginally brighter than they, and seemed pleased with his little gang.

Professor Quirrell -- whose lessons would have been more interesting if it hadn't been for the strong smell of garlic and the constant stuttering -- often singled out Harry to answer questions, apparently assuming that Harry was some sort of Defence expert. He also giggled nervously whenever he looked at Harry. The other Slytherins teased him a bit about how anxious he made Professor Quirrell, but it seemed good-natured, and certainly was kind compared to what the other Slytherins said about Quirrell himself.

In every class so far, Harry had been singled out in some fashion, except for Transfiguration, and Harry felt sure that Professor McGonagall was ostentatiously, purposely treating him like the other students. He was glad that Professor McGonagall was even-handed, as Harry didn't seem to have a strong knack for Transfiguration (something he definitely didn't want Sirius to find out about). He began arriving early to class specifically so he could sit with Padma, who was excellent at it, and sweet-talk her into helping him.

The class he was really looking forward to, however, was Friday's class -- double Potions with Gryffindor. This was Professor Snape's class, and he'd finally be able to see what Snape was like as a teacher. He'd already been warned not to expect preference, which would be a relief, and there would be no talk of scars or You Know Who or the Boy Who Lived, he was sure. For one, Snape already knew all there was to know about Harry; for another, Harry knew Snape well enough to guess that even if he hadn't, he would have kept his curiosity to himself, like Professor

McGonagall, and got on with the job of teaching.

Most of all Harry wanted to do well in Potions, to impress Professor Snape.

He could hardly eat that morning, for excitement, though Padma forced him to finish a bowl of cereal and a banana before she was satisfied. He was going to be early anyway; he and Padma had made a habit of eating early so as to avoid the Slytherin prefect kicking her off the Slytherin table. Draco usually joined them, he said to escape his rather dull Hufflepuff mates. Neville, on the other hand, regularly overslept and sometimes missed the meal entirely, meaning Harry only ever saw him when Slytherin and Gryffindor had class together -- like they did for Friday morning Potions.

"Should I go fetch him?" Harry fretted, when Neville was nowhere to be found that morning.

"You're not his keeper," Draco pointed out around a mouthful of potatoes.

"Doesn't mean I can't look out for him," Harry answered, as Snake slithered off his wrist and wrapped himself happily around a goblet of hot cocoa, soaking up the warmth. Harry had assumed, once the novelty of classes wore off, that the reptile would want to spend his days basking on the grounds or sleeping in the Dungeons, but to his surprise, Snake had insisted on accompanying him everywhere. He still spent most of his time asleep, however. Snakes did that.

"Harry's got a pet Gryffindor," Draco drawled, and Padma grinned.

"Remus told me I had to look out for him," he said, which was almost true. "He's family."

"He is?" Padma asked.

"Well, sort of."

"Think you could have given him some of the graceful genes?" Draco inquired.

"Malfoy!" Padma scolded.

"What? In Transfiguration he's always blowing something up, and drawing attention."

"You don't have to be his partner if you don't want to," Padma said severely. Draco ducked his head, and the tips of his ears turned red.

"I didn't know anyone else to ask if they'd be my partner. I don't think anyone else'd have me," he murmured. Harry frowned, slightly; he knew some of the students had been pointedly ignoring Draco -- both those who had been raised thinking his father was a murdering brute, and those who might have approved, but couldn't publicly show their approval. They tended to be ashamed of him anyway, since he was a Hufflepuff; Harry remembered hearing that Sirius had suffered from that too, when the most promising of a long line of Slytherins had gone into Gryffindor instead.

"Then you oughtn't beat bludgers at Neville," Padma continued.

"At least I don't blow things up."

Their bickering was interrupted by the owl post, which coincided with the arrival of the Slytherin prefect, and Padma and Draco ran off to their separate tables, leaving Harry to read his letter from Sirius in the company of Blaise and Pansy, who were discussing Potions.

"I heard Professor Snape hates students and only teaches because nowhere else will hire him," Pansy said, wrinkling her nose at the apparently too-bourgeois-to-eat breakfast food.

"I heard nobody else will hire him because he was a Death Eater," Blaise replied.

"That's not true," Harry said sharply, and they both glanced at him. Theodore might have Crabbe and Goyle, but Harry was the undeniable leader of the first year boys; he was cooler than Blaise and smarter than Theodore, and he was friends with Neville Longbottom, who was the loudest if the least competent of the Gryffindors.

"Then why don't we ever see him?" Pansy asked, as Millicent arrived, trailed by Crabbe and Goyle.

"You would if you didn't spend all your time giggling over the older boys in a corner of the common room with Bulstrode," Harry answered, and Pansy flushed scarlet. "I see him in the dungeons all the time."

Just then Snake uncurled from the cocoa cup, and Harry held out his hand, allowing the small, warm creature to weave itself between his fingers.

"If you don't do well in Potions it'll go hard on you," Harry said sternly, and stood, gathering up his book-bag. "If I catch you losing us points I'll make sure everyone knows what you said about Marcus Flint last night."

"You daren't!" Pansy shrieked, her bobbed hair flying around her cheeks. "You don't know I said anything!"

"I do now," Harry grinned. He noticed Neville arriving breathlessly in the doorway, and picked up a few slices of toast and some bacon, making his

retreat as the other Slytherins turned their curiosity on Pansy. Neville waited until they were in the hallway on their way to the dungeons before accepting the food.

"Thanks Harry. I can't seem to get my alarm charm to work," he sighed, sinking his teeth into the hastily-made bacon sandwich. "Just as well, really, this way I won't have time to be nervous. I only got up when I did because Andromeda's owl found me in the dorm and wouldn't let go of my hair till I took the letter," he said, pointing to a bare place just behind his left ear. "Is that post from your godfather?"

"Yeah, just normal stuff. They've locked up River House -- the place where we were living -- and they're still unpacking in the attic."

"That'll be fun," Neville said cheerfully, as they reached the bottom of the stairs down into the Potions classroom. "We'll have holidays together and such. Christmas in Diagon Alley is brilliant, they charm the snowmen to move about and give people directions, since we get so many tourists. Last year Dora and I made fifteen Galleons singing carols on streetcorners. We can't neither of us sing, but lots of young men like Dora and all the mums like me," he added. "We gave half to the Aurors' Relief Fund -- " he stopped in the middle of the Potions classroom, and stared around. "Look at this place!"

Harry grinned. He'd been in the classroom before, many times, in the months he'd spent visiting Professor Snape; he was familiar with the animal room too, where the snakes -- and their prey -- were kept. The peculiar jars, the pitted worktables, the odd smell; all familiar and comforting, if only vaguely, like the memories of Sandust and the early days in Remus' flat in Little Whinging.

"Sit with me, Harry, will you? Otherwise Granger's going to want to sit next to me and tell me how to do everything. She's a bit of a nightmare," Neville said frankly. "I know I'm not that bright, but honestly, I think I'd like to make my own mistakes."

Harry was hesitant about sitting with Neville, who did have a tendency to destroy things, but they had made a deal on the train. He sat down at a worktable near the front, and Neville slid in next to him, taking out a sheet of parchment and tacking it down, idly twiddling his quill between his fingers.

Other students began to drift in slowly, while Neville finished his breakfast and Harry arranged his cauldron and note-parchment, made sure his tie was straight and his robe was properly done up. He gave Ron a wave and a grin when he took the table next to theirs -- joined, oddly enough, by Blaise. Harry glanced around and realised that slowly, all of the students who were arriving were following the seating arrangements: Hermione Granger and Millicent Bulstrode, Theodore Nott and Lavender Brown, Seamus Finnegan and Pansy Parkinson, who glared daggers at Harry and Neville before refusing to look at them at all.

Harry was about to turn to Neville and remark on the unusual seating, when the door flew open and Professor Snape strode down the aisle, turning to face the class.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," he began. Harry sat rapt, listening intently, as the rest of the class fell silent. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic."

He swept the class with his eyes, coolly. "I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses..."

He gathered his robes around him, suddenly distant and grown-up and slightly dangerous. "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- "

Harry risked a sidelong look at the other students, and realised that Professor Snape had the same gift McGonagall had; he was speaking softly, and his words were not precisely kind, but he could keep the class silent by his mere presence.

"If you aren't as big a bunch of idiots as I usually have to teach," he finished.

Harry blinked.

"Yeah, he's always like that," Fred Weasley said, flopping back on the grass to stare up at the still-summery sky. Most of the Gryffindor first years, along with Fred, George, Padma, two of her Ravenclaw friends, Draco, Pansy and Blaise were all gathered on the lawns outside the castle, enjoying the early-September sun and relaxing after their first week of classes, making full use of their Friday afternoon off.

Draco was watching clouds cross the deep blue sky, oblivious to the fact that George had charmed little miniature false clouds to drift across his vision, eddying into unusual shapes, until one of them was a little too realistically obscene. The rest of the children shrieked with laughter as Draco flung a clump of grass at George, and George shot it back with a flick of his wand, striking Draco's forehead and leaving a small smear of dirt.

Harry grinned and stroked Snake's head, where the little creature was coiled up on Harry's chest, sunning himself and occasionally threatening to slither off and find a rock that didn't fidget so often. Harry wasn't ready to give up their discussion so easily, though, and he fumbled for the right words to express what he was thinking.

"I thought he'd be...well, not nicer, but..."

"He's not really a bad sort," George said, "He just doesn't like teaching first-years much."

"I think he's horrible," Hermione Granger said. "He didn't call on me once."

"Maybe if you hadn't nearly fallen out of your seat waving your hand around like a know-all, he would have," Ron replied. Hermione scowled.

"He wasn't very nice to Neville."

"Longbottom let his potion boil over," Blaise pointed out. "If he called him incompetent as usual he was only saying what everyone else is thinking."

"If you call Neville incompetent again, Zabini, I'll break your arms," Harry said calmly, without looking at him. Draco gave Harry a small grin.

"Well, he is," Blaise insisted.

"There's no need to keep reminding him, he's doing the best he can."

"You certainly haven't got anything to worry about," Blaise answered. "Pay attention to Potter's chopped Valerian Root, class, note the attention to detail and the precision. Five points to Slytherin," he drawled, in a fairly good imitation of Snape, if Snape's voice had been an octave or so higher than it was in reality.

Harry had been a bit unnerved by the praise, but then he had been fairly proud of his work, and didn't really think it was undeserved. "Well, anyhow, he did send him to the infirmary right away and didn't take any points off. When Seamus accidentally transfigured his fingers into flowers, Professor McGonagall made him wait all class before she let him go."

"I didn't mind," Seamus said. "Cept for the allergies. Kinda cool, really."

"The thing to remember about Professor Snape," George said, sitting up and regarding them with a rare serious look, "Is that he wants you to be perfect and he gets frustrated when you aren't, cos, well, you're ickle screwup kiddies."

"Thanks," Harry said dryly.

"He yelled at us for hours over the Giggling Brew we put in the water last year," Fred added, "But when he got done yelling -- "

"-- and giggling -- " George added.

"-- he made us show him how to do it and he teaches it in fourth year curriculum now. Knows a good thing when he sees it, Snape. Plays favourites and his team cheats at Quidditch, but you'll learn stuff, which is more than'll happen in Defence or Divination."

"Your fan club's back, Harry," Draco called, and Harry propped himself on his elbows to see a couple of second-year Gryffindors wander past, gawking at him.

"Awww, is the Boy Who Lived shy?" Padma teased, when Harry scooted behind Fred and George, out of their direct line of sight.

"I'm going to see Neville in the infirmary," Harry announced, dislodging Snake from his chest as he stood, and gathering him into a pocket. Draco and Padma scrambled up also; the rest of the sunbathers wandered away, or gathered themselves into a closer group to continue discussing classes.

"You can't go anywhere without being stared at, can you?" Padma asked, as they passed into the castle, and a redheaded Hufflepuff stumbled out of their way, staring at Harry.

"No," Harry said glumly.

"Buck up, it'll wear off," Draco said. "You've just got to be absolutely mediocre for a while. You know, what you've got to be is boring."

Harry sighed, and led them onwards towards the infirmary.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 6

If Harry could have seen Sirius that Friday, they might have commiserated on their sudden notoriety; granted, Sirius didn't have a scar for people to gossip over, but he had an arse, and people were discussing it.

He could tell that was what the table of women across the restaurant aisle were doing, because they kept looking at it. He'd tried hanging his jacket over the chair to block them, but it was a leather jacket, his leather jacket, and they seemed just as impressed by that as by the other thing. He hadn't dared take his motorcycle out since bringing it up from the River House -- where he hadn't been able to fly it, though he'd taken it ground-riding through the hills occasionally -- for fear he might actually be mobbed.

It wasn't that he didn't like attention. He did. It was just that...well, this wasn't the sort of attention he wanted, and it certainly wasn't the sort of attention he wanted for Harry. There hadn't been any more articles about Harry since the first one, nearly a week ago, but one was enough; one was more than enough. Harry didn't need people talking about him, or about his godfather.

Besides, he didn't want women looking at him. A little voice deep inside said he didn't want the temptation, which women certainly had been in the past -- before Remus -- and back then he'd never bothered resisting because there hadn't been a reason to. A louder voice said that he was more than a pocketbook with a pretty face and a famous kid.

The loudest voice said that Remus was laughing at him.

"You should not be amused," he said to Remus, who was savoring a very large turkey sandwich, a specialty of the pub down the street from Andromeda's shop. "You should be jealous, or territorial, or something."

Remus licked a bit of mustard from the corner of his mouth, and Sirius' heart rate sped up just a little.

"All right, tell me this," Remus said. "Do I need to worry about competition from a woman whose first interest in you is your -- "

"No," Sirius said, before he could finish. "But it'd be nice if you pretended."

"Do you find them attractive?" Remus asked, taking another bite.

Sirius snuck a glance at the women, some of whom gave little waves.

"Not them," he said, then gestured with his fork at a solitary diner a few tables away. "Now her..."

"Hmm," Remus said as he swallowed. "I'd almost leave you for her."

Sirius gave him such a horrified look that Remus shook his head. "You can't let it get to you like this, Pads."

"Easy for you to say, you're just an anonymous valet."

"You see the advantages of being plain and only moderately wealthy," Remus answered.

"You're not plain."

"Love is blind."

"Remus -- "

"Very casually look to your left."

Sirius gaped at him for a moment, then slowly bent his head and scratched the back of it while sweeping the area to his left.

A well-dressed young man smiled at him, and gave him a wave very similar to those of the admiring young women.

"Now I'm territorial," Remus said, with a low, wolfish growl. Sirius grinned, then quickly looked away as the young man grinned back. "By the way," Remus continued, "do you remember what I said I could do to you once we had our wands back?"

Sirius drained his beer. "I'll get the tab."

Remus chuckled. "Take your time. We have errands to run this afternoon."

Sirius, whose body had automatically reacted to the almost husky tones Remus had adopted, signaled the waiter anyhow, but after he'd left a pile of coins on the check, found himself following Remus away from the entrance to TONKS & TONKS, south towards Gringotts.

"If you're thinking of a dark alley, I think you should know I'm getting too old for -- "

"What would we do in a dark alley?" Remus inquired innocently. "I need an owl."

Sirius stopped dead. "What are we going to do with an owl?" he asked, in a slightly strangled voice. Remus turned briefly, but kept walking.

"Send post, of course. It's about time we had one of our own."

"Moony -- "

"Patience, Padfoot," Remus murmured. "I promised Andromeda I'd bring her some owl feed for hers, and we could use one." He stretched out his hand to a perchful of owls, most of whom rose up and began flapping insanely, blowing both men's hair into disarray. "We don't want one that scares easy, do we?" he asked, with a brilliant smile at Sirius, who felt the vague arousal from before tighten into something tense and impatient, low in his belly.

"No," Sirius said, moving closer. "We don't."

"We want one like Claw used to be," Remus continued, referring to the old owl they'd had to leave for Moody to sell when they moved to Bewys Beddau. "Except not ill-tempered and hateful."

Two owls had remained calmly on the perch, while the others hooted and flapped at the smell of werewolf; one was a giant, evil-looking creature which snapped its beak at Remus' fingers, clearly choosing attack instead of defence. The other was a snowy owl, which had merely hunched down and hooted once, softly, before complacently ignoring the rest of them.

Remus very carefully stroked the owl's head with his fingers, and she preened a little. Sirius knew the feeling.

"This one," he said. "I like her."

They paid for the owl and the feed, and Sirius waited impatiently while she was put into a cage and handed to Remus, who was quiet and smilingly unhurried as they made their way back to the entrance to the old Grimmauld Place house, through the ground-floor shop and up to their attic rooms. Remus insisted on stopping in the downstairs kitchen to hang their owl's cage next to Andromeda's, and release her so that she could stretch her wings a bit.

"So," he said, as they climbed the stairs, "What do you think we should -- mmh..."

Sirius, tired of playing games, had pinned him to the wall of the landing, in front of the door to their rooms, and made a spirited try at kissing the breath out of him. After a second he felt the other man respond, familiar deft fingers winding in his hair and curling against his back, body swaying forward just a little to press close, mouth opening beneath the assault.

"Tease," Sirius said, fumbling for the doorhandle with one hand and guiding them both inside, the door shutting and locking behind them.

"Territorial," Remus answered, which confused Sirius, but he didn't let that get in his way; his fingers were already working the buttons of Remus' waistcoat, followed by his shirt; Remus, busy kissing and licking his way down Sirius' throat, untucked the plain white shirt and leaned back for just long enough to pull it over Sirius' head. They made their way to the bedroom with a trail of discarded shoes and clothing falling behind them, the occasional moan or gasp escaping as they kissed.

"Eligible bachelor indeed," Remus murmured, turning to push him gently onto the bed, but Sirius rolled and pinned him, straddling his hips and grinning.

"Anonymous valet," Sirius answered, catching his wrists when he reached up, and holding him down. Remus looked up at him, brown eyes wide, hair in disarray on the blanket, and licked his lips.

"That could be fun," he said softly.

"Some other time," Sirius growled, and bent to nip along the line of his collarbone, pressing their bodies together, inhaling deeply. Remus moved restlessly underneath him, rebellious at being held down, but Sirius didn't release his wrists, knowing full well that if the other man really wanted to be freed, he could easily throw him.

They fell into a sort of rhythm, within the struggle, Remus arching and tipping his head back, Sirius buried in the feel and scent of his skin, working his way slowly across his chest, down his ribcage and over his belly. There were old scars here, and he finally released Remus' wrists as he kissed his way over the especially sensitive skin, nuzzling against the ridge of his hipbone.

Remus stopped trying to gain the upper hand and began to beg, words falling from his mouth in an almost incoherent stream as Sirius lapped gently at his cock, pleased at the way he could make Remus lose control. After two years he knew what Remus liked, and was skilled enough -- oh the time he'd spent learning, Remus' hands and voice guiding him -- to provide it.

When Remus fell silent he knew to stop, to move back up his body and kiss him until his breathing had evened again.

"Tease," Remus moaned, around his mouth.

"You love it," Sirius answered, leaning back.

"Where are you -- "

"Shh," Sirius said, putting a finger over Remus' lips, and bent down over the side of the bed, to fetch his wand from his trouser pocket. When Remus saw him grin and twirl it between his fingers, he moaned again.

"I believe you were talking," Sirius said, drawing shapes on bare skin with the tip of his wand, "about what we could do with magic...I remember a spell..."

He said a few soft words, and Remus gasped as the spell did its work; Sirius grinned. He'd always had a way with charms, and that was all this was, really...

"Now, Sirius," Remus urged, rolling to one side, and Sirius slid down behind him, pulling him close and wrapping his arms around his chest, nudging his thighs apart a little. Remus bucked back against him, and Sirius murmured quietly in his ear, soothing nonsense that nevertheless made Remus tremble with impatience and need.

He moved his hips gently, slowly, pushing inside, reveling in the feeling, new each time and still familiar; the sound of Remus' voice, feel of his body, harder and less yielding than a woman's might be. But Sirius loved the shape of it, the skin-over-muscle feeling, and hadn't missed anything from his life before Remus, before this. One of his hands slipped down over Remus' belly and rubbed small circles there, before moving lower to stroke him gently. Remus said his name, over and over, head tipped against his shoulder, eyes closed, until he finally tensed, body nearly convulsing in orgasm. Sirius buried his face in Remus' hair and inhaled as he came, lost in the body in his arms.

"Hedwig."

"What?"

"We can name her Hedwig."

"That's what you're thinking about right now, Moony?"

"Mm. Well. I get thoughtful when you're around."

"I see. Next time I'll make sure to ask you where you think the maple bookcase ought to go, before we do this."

"Next to the window on the left-hand side of the kitchen."

"Oh. That would be a good place."

"Clearly we need to do this more often."

"Clearly."

"Remus Lupin answers all your questions, free of charge."

"All right then, I've got one for you."

"Ask away, Pads."

"Why'd you taunt me this afternoon?"

"Hm?"

"At the pub. And then going to buy an owl. You don't usually play games, Moony."

"I told you. I was feeling...territorial."

"And?"

"And I thought if you got impatient I'd know...maybe a better word would have been insecure."

"You still don't trust me?"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, are you satisfied now?"

"Thoroughly, Sirius."

"Good."

"Though I do have a question for you, too."

"Oh?"

"Why don't you want this?"

"This? What do you -- "

"Calm down. I just meant...this world. You know. You don't want to be here again. You must have a reason, Pads."

"I don't know, it seemed like...Wales was just us, you and Harry and me, and...the people there were just people, we didn't really know them, or if we did we weren't going to be there more than a year or two. Now it's real, we're here -- people I've known since I was a child...and not all of them are going to be as accepting as Andromeda and Ted. And with that article, you know it won't be the last one, and this sort of thing -- that is to say, it'd be awful for Harry if there was a scandal, and if they tried to take him away from me -- "

"Sirius, breathe."

"Sorry."

"There won't be a scandal. This isn't anyone's business but ours. They won't take Harry away from you."

"They did once."

"And we got him back, didn't we?"

"Yeah. We did."

"It'll be all right, Pads."

"You know, when you say that, I almost believe it."

Harry and company arrived at the Hospital Wing to hear a deep rumble from within: Hagrid's voice, answered by Poppy Pomfrey, the school Healer. Harry stopped at the threshold and held his finger to his lips, listening; Padma and Draco took the other side of the door, pressing their ears to the crack there.

"Lucky I went when I did, an' no mistake," Hagrid was saying, and Draco pushed on the door just a little, trying to see inside.

"They're having tea," he whispered. "Maybe we should come back?"

"Are you kidding?" Harry whispered back, over Pomfrey's reply. "Shut up, I want to hear this!"

"-- an' no word on who tried it," Hagrid finished. "Though I can't help thinkin' they 'ad to have help."

"An inside job?" Pomfrey sounded scandalised. "Certainly not, you know how goblins are!"

"How else did someone get all the way down there an' back withou' gettin' caught?" Hagrid asked. "Fer that matter, how'd someone know what was there in the firs' place?"

"I read about this," Padma whispered. "Someone tried to rob Gringotts!"

"Well, it's safely at Hogwarts now," Pomfrey answered, and they heard them sipping their tea. "Though I must say it makes me nervous. I wish Albus had destroyed it on the last solstice, this waiting about for June twenty-first is putting me on edge, I tell you."

"Hagrid was at Gringotts when we were opening Sirius' account there," Harry said, as Hagrid answered something they couldn't make out. Just then there was the rattle of a teacup being set in a saucer, and the squeak of a chair being pushed back.

"Bes' be on my way then," Hagrid said, and Harry signaled the others to follow him away from the door, moving silently back down the hall until they were just around the corner.

"I bet it's whatever's hidden in the third floor corridor we're not allowed into!" Padma said, a trifle louder, as they caught their breath and waited for the sound of Hagrid leaving. The door shut, and Harry resolutely stepped around the corner, nearly running into Hagrid.

"Well, hello there, Harry!" Hagrid said cheerfully. "What're you doing lurking about' the hospital wing?"

"We've come to see Neville, Mr. Hagrid," Harry answered, while Draco visibly fought the urge to flee the giant, wild-looking man.

"Jus' Hagrid, Harry, that's fine enough," Hagrid answered. "And a good lot you are to come see him," he added, peering in mild confusion at the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff badges Padma and Draco wore. "Come down to my hut sometime an' say hello, have some cake. Bake it myself," he added proudly.

"Thank you, Hagrid," they chorused, and Draco bolted past him, while Harry and Padma followed at a more sedate pace. They heard Pomfrey scold Draco for running in the infirmary, and his stammered apology, as they entered.

"Ah, and the rest of the troublemakers," Pomfrey said, with a warm smile. "You'd be Harry, eh? Lucky you escaped when the cauldron boiled over, isn't it?"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," Harry answered. "How is he?"

"He's fine. I'm keeping him overnight, but you're welcome to see him, if you like. Only don't give him any sweets, sugar counteracts the antidote," she said, waving them towards a room past the main one. Harry peered inside, then waved at Neville, who beamed and waved back.

"What a mess, eh?" he asked, as Harry led the way into the room. "Hallo Padma, hi Malfoy."

Neville sat crosslegged on the hospital bed, a book and a sheet of parchment on his lap, with a quill and an inkpot nearby. When he'd left the potions classroom he'd been covered in boils from the cauldron overflow; now he seemed to have had some odd variant of the chicken pox, or possibly been attacked by someone with a red permanent marker.

"I'm telling Dora all about it," he said, indicating the parchment. "Want me to say hi for you, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry answered. "Are you catching?"

"Nope! Just itchy," Neville answered, absently scratching his neck. "Anything interesting happen after I left?"

"Not really," Padma said, as Harry hopped up on the foot of the bed and Draco followed suit. "Cept we almost got caught eavesdropping on Hagrid."

"Oh yeah?" Neville asked interestedly. "The groundskeeper? He's huge. What was he saying?"

Harry told him about the meeting with Hagrid in Diagon Alley, and what they'd heard of his conversation with Madam Pomfrey, Draco and Padma adding details. When they were done, Neville looked thoughtful.

"What do you reckon it is?" he asked. "Must be something really valuable, if someone tried to steal it from Gringotts. Maybe it's a treasure."

"Then why would Headmaster Dumbledore want to destroy it? It must be something magic."

"Scares Madam Pomfrey, anyhow," Draco said. "Bet you it's something really cool..."

Padma looked rather worried at the thoughtful expression on Draco's face, but Harry turned back to Neville.

"So when do we get to spring you?" he asked. Neville sighed.

"Not until tomorrow. Madam Pomfrey wants to watch me overnight. Guess I'll get a lot of homework done -- bound to be dull here otherwise."

"We could keep you company," Padma suggested.

"Madam Pomfrey says I can only have visitors until dinner."

"Well, we'll just sneak back, won't we?" Harry said.

"We will?" Padma asked archly.

"I will if Harry will," Draco volunteered.

"Remus told me how to get into the kitchens," Harry added. "We can raid it and have a midnight picnic."

"Am I the only one who thinks it's a stupid idea to steal food from the kitchen and sneak into the hospital wing all in one night?" Padma asked the general company.

"Yes," Neville answered. Padma sighed. "I'm sorry, but it'll be much more interesting with you lot here."

"Fine. If I don't come along you'll probably mess it up anyhow," she said resignedly. Draco bounced on the bed a little.

"We should split up so we don't all get caught," he said seriously. "We'll agree to meet back here at nine? Harry, you can bring the food."

Harry saluted. "Any special requests?"

"Marzipan," Draco said promptly.

"I meant Neville," Harry answered. Neville looked thoughtful.

"I like apples," he mused. "And some bread and butter, if you can get some."

"I dunno what the kitchens are like, but I'll find something," Harry promised. "It's almost dinnertime -- we should go," he said, and Draco slid reluctantly off the bed, following Padma to the door. Harry hesitated, then plucked Snake out of his pocket. "Here," he said impulsively. "Snake can keep you company until then."

He bent his head close to Snake so that Neville couldn't hear him whisper quick instructions. Snake's tongue flicked out, tickling his cheek, and then he slithered across Harry's shoulders and down his arm. Harry placed him on the bed, and Snake wrapped himself around Neville's inkpot. Neville beamed.

"Thanks, Harry!" he called, as Padma and Draco summoned him, and Harry ran out of the room with a hurried wave.

Dear Harry,

I'm glad to hear your first week went well, and that you're making friends. Especially Neville. Up Gryffindor, right?

Sorry, it's just taking some getting used to, you know. I'm still proud of you. You see? It's perfectly fine at Hogwarts, people like you and you won't fail anything. Walk in the park, right?

Speaking of which, we've officially finished moving into the new flat. We're fixing up your bedroom so that you'll hardly know the difference from the River House when you get here. At least, if Remus doesn't buy out Flourish & Blotts first, and fill the place with books. Not that you'd mind, I suspect.

There's dinner. Give the owl who brought this a special treat; her name's Hedwig, and we just bought her.

Sirius

Harry decided there was hardly any point in going back to Slytherin common room after dinner; they'd only ask him where he was going when he tried to leave. Instead, he hid out in the library until lights-out, hardly a chore even on a Friday night; he loved the Hogwarts library, with its dim stacks and comfortable wing-chairs. Long ago, after Peter had tried to kill him, Sirius had brought him here for safekeeping; Harry associated the smell of the library with comfort, and the feel of Sirius' arms.

When Madam Pince finally shoo'ed him out, somewhat more affectionately than the other students, he made his way slowly down to the dim corridor where the still-life portrait of a bowl of fruit was, the one Remus had mentioned in his letter. He looked at it curiously, wondering if Remus had been entirely serious, but then Remus wasn't overly given to practical jokes.

Feeling a bit of a fool, he reached up and tickled the pear, which squealed -- and turned into a doorhandle. Harry pulled it open slowly, and slunk inside when no-one screamed in outrage or popped out of the woodwork to stop him.

Inside was a room easily the size of the Great Hall, filled with pots and pans, bowls, strange-looking implements for stirring and mixing, jars of spices, ropes of garlic and peppers hanging from the rafters.

There were also a dozen or so small green creatures staring up at him, distracted from various tasks.

"It is Harry Potter," one of them said, obsequiously. Harry sighed. Even house-elves knew who he was.

"Harry Potter has come to visit the kitchens!" squeaked another.

"Er...yes," Harry said. "I...was looking for some apples."

Immediately there was a flurry of activity as they all dropped what they were doing. In barely a minute, a basket sat before him, lined with white linen napkins and half-full of giant red apples. They beamed up at him, clearly awaiting his approval.

"Thank you," Harry said weakly.

"Harry Potter is only wanting apples?" one asked. "Harry Potter does not want a cup of tea?"

"No thanks, these are...for a friend, and I have to take them to him..."

"Harry Potter is a very good boy," said one of them, who appeared to be arguably female. "Does Harry Potter's friend want anything else?"

Harry saw their eager-to-please looks, and remembered Draco's remark from earlier. "Bread and butter, and...do you, er, have any marzipan?"

They began to move, and then nearly as one, paused and turned back to him.

"Is Harry Potter's friend Master Draco?" one of them asked. Harry stared at him.

"Master Draco is a good friend of house-elves," another one piped up. "Master Draco's house-elves are coming to Hogwarts, Harry Potter, and telling us all about him."

"Marzipan!" one squeaked, and rushed off. He returned shortly with a tray of little blue wizard's hats, decorated with shiny yellow stars. Harry broke the tip off one and tasted it; sweet almonds. The elf tipped the rest into the basket, on top of the apples and next to a loaf of bread another one had provided, tucked up against a small box of butter.

Harry tried to recall what special sweets Padma liked, and came up with a vague memory of her eating a chocolate frog.

"Could I have, um, some humbugs? And maybe some chocolate?" he asked, and was hardly finished before the sweets appeared in the basket. He carefully folded the edges of the napkins over the food, and stood there for a minute.

"Thanks," he said finally. "Er, again."

"It is our pleasure, Harry Potter," said the apparent spokesman, bowing. "Harry Potter may visit the house-elves whenever he likes. And may bring Master Draco," he added meaningfully. Harry found himself hustled towards the door, and stepped out into the hallway as the house-elves swung the door shut behind him.

He had time for one deep breath before he realised he wasn't alone in the hallway.

"Harry," said Professor Snape, gazing down at him in mild surprise.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 7

Harry stared up at his Head of House, wondering what the penalty was for getting caught raiding the kitchen and out after hours in one's first week of school. Probably fairly dire, he decided, while the rest of his brain was busy working on a decent excuse and coming up empty.

Snape's eyes drifted down to the basket he was carrying.

"Stealing sweets?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. Harry felt his insides wither a bit.

"The house-elves gave them to me," Harry said, and then, desperately and possibly stupidly, reached inside. "Er...apple?"

"You, Mr. Potter, are out of dormitory after hours," Snape said darkly, accepting the offered apple and considering it, long pale fingers turning it over and over in his palm.

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed, thinking frantically.

"In the kitchens, which are not -- strictly speaking -- a permitted area for students, especially first-years."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you had enough time to formulate an appropriate lie?"

Harry stared up at him. "Nearly, sir," he blurted.

Snape gave him a slightly sardonic smile.

"You will not get far in this world, Harry, if you cannot lie convincingly. I am sure your godfather has taught you as much, though perhaps not as explicitly," Snape continued. "I hope you have risked a somewhat severe punishment for an appropriate purpose."

Harry bridled a little at the mention of Sirius, which, as always, was spoken in a somewhat belittling tone. "Would you like the lie first or the truth first, sir?" he asked.

The smile broadened just slightly. "The lie first, if you please."

"I found a valuable dish in Theodore's trunk and was bringing it back before it got broken, and the house-elves gave me a reward," Harry said, feeling that for a twenty-two second excuse it was rather a good one.

"Incriminating a rival, performing a good deed, and excusing your theft. A decent beginning. The truth now, if you please."

Harry bowed his head. "We were going to meet Neville in the infirmary and bring him a treat."

"We?"

"I -- "

"We, Harry?"

"Draco and Padma and me," Harry said wretchedly. "But it was my idea -- "

"I'm certain it was," Snape drawled. "While your originality is laudable, your purpose is questionable. Bringing a reward to the boy who blew up your first assignment?"

"We rather felt the boils and your shouting were punishment enough for that," Harry answered, looking up defiantly. Snape met his gaze easily, and Harry knew if they got into a staring contest, here and now, he would lose badly. Snape's cool, dark eyes gave nothing away.

"Five points from Slytherin for an unconvincing lie and another five for having abominable timing. Run along then," he said finally. Harry tightened his grip on the basket.

"What?"

"If you're caught by Filch you've only yourself to blame," Snape said, and turned, continuing down the corridor, robes billowing, apple still in his hand. Harry was left standing outside the kitchens entrance, dumbly staring after him.

Then, before Snape could change his mind, he ran.

Minerva McGonagall's quarters, like most of the Heads of House, were not too far from her House dormitories, Gryffindor Tower. On the one hand, her windows afforded a truly splendid view of the wilderness around the school grounds; on the other, the trade-off was a three and, depending on the castle's mood, sometimes a four-storey climb to get there.

She also shared a wall with the narrow stairwell that led to the roof, one of the few access points in the castle, hidden behind a painting of Galileo. Few people knew it was there and even fewer knew the password, so when she heard the portrait-door open, squeaking slightly, she pulled her robes on and peered outside. She heard light, swift footsteps on the stairs, as the portrait swung shut.

Probably some seventh years climbing up for a reunion tryst after a summer apart. Well, they could bloody well have their reunion somewhere other than the roof over her head. She found her wand and stuffed it into her pocket, locking her door behind her.

"Password, magistra?" Galileo asked.

"Eppur si muove," she said, and he bowed and swung open.

She climbed quietly to the roof, putting her head out the open trapdoor. A single dark shadow sat on the tiles, legs bent, elbows on knees. A little too well-grown to be a student, a little too thin to be anyone other than Severus Snape.

"Severus?" she asked curiously. He turned to her, the three-line mark on his cheekbone livid on his pale face, a souvenir of his part in the battle with Peter Pettigrew.

"I'm on your roof," he said, voice carefully even.

"Yes, although I confess you're the last person I expected to find here."

He had an apple. Curiouser and curiouser.

"Are you all right, Severus?"

"Quite," he answered shortly, and neatly cut a slice from the apple, eating it with tidy grace.

"Er...you're not going to fling yourself off the roof, are you?" she asked carefully. She was aware that she wasn't well-known for her tact, but tact, she felt, was highly overrated when one wasn't dealing with employers or foreign governments.

He snorted. "If I intended to kill myself I'd be much more efficient about it than this."

"Good to know, I suppose," she answered, sitting on the edge of the trap. He offered her a slice of the apple, and she accepted delicately. She waited; she found silence was usually as effective as active interrogation. It had worked on Severus when he was a student, anyway. And the night he'd come to her, before Voldemort's fall, asking for her help, though never explicitly.

He drew a breath, and ate another slice of apple, transfigured knife glinting in the moonlight.

"Have you ever..." he began, then sighed and started over. "The boy troubles me."

"Harry?"

"Who else?"

She was silent again.

"He is...very like his father. And yet at the same time, completely unlike."

"I think perhaps he's unlike what you thought of his father."

He gave her a sharp look. She shrugged. "You hated James, and he hated you. There's no secret in that. You don't hate Harry."

He didn't answer.

"Are you going to stay up here all night?"

"I'm not a student, you know, you can't give me detention for it."

"Well, if you're going to catch cold up here alone, at least try not to clatter about too much. Some of us sleep when it gets dark."

He nodded, once, and pitched the core of his apple off the roof. She descended the stairs, said a polite goodnight to Galileo, and returned to her rooms. If he did move, he was suitably silent about it; she heard nothing else before she fell asleep that night.

Harry arrived at the infirmary wing breathless and nearly ran into Draco, coming from the opposite direction.

"Kitchen -- house-elves -- hats," he gasped. Draco stared at him. Harry leaned against the wall, catching his breath.

"Padma's on her way, I saw her on the stairs," Draco said. "This is exciting, isn't it? Mrs. Norris was after me, but I doubled around the statue of the dog on the second floor, you know, the snarly one -- " he made fangs out of his fingers, holding them up to his mouth. "Then when she came up I jumped out and growled at her -- you should have seen her run. I'm sure she's got Filch scouring the second floor."

"She has," Padma said, as she arrived, so suddenly that Draco jumped. "I watched him from the third-floor for a bit -- nearly got caught myself."

Harry opened his mouth to gasp out something about Snape catching him, then remembered Snape's gaze, telling nothing and asking nothing, and he closed his mouth again.

"Now..." Padma said softly, peering through the crack between the infirmary door and the frame, "...we just need to know where Madam Pomfrey is..."

She fell backwards with a yelp as the door opened, and only Draco's quick hand over her mouth kept the sound from carrying; Neville stood on the other side, holding the door.

"Come inside," he whispered. "Madam Pomfrey's gone for the night, she said, since I'm not in any danger."

"Then why are we whispering?" Draco asked.

"Because it's fun?"

Harry gave Draco a light shove into the infirmary, and followed the rest of them. They arranged themselves on Neville's bed, and Harry began unpacking the food. Draco beamed with pleasure when the little wizard's hats were set out on one of the napkins, and Padma took the chocolate with quiet grace; Neville sliced the bread with a quick charm (shredding one of the blankets in the process, though Padma fixed it so that you almost couldn't tell) and buttered the slices, while Harry unpacked the apples.

"It's brilliant, isn't it?" Neville asked, biting into a large slice of buttered bread. "This, I mean. You going to show us how to get into the kitchens, Harry?"

"I'm not sure I should," Harry answered, rather wanting to keep the painting-entrance a secret. "We're not supposed to be in there."

"Imagine if someone had caught you!" Padma shivered delightedly. Harry, thinking reservedly of Snape's closed, expressionless eyes, said nothing.

Talk turned to a general discussion of the castle's twists and turns: Neville's difficulty discerning doors from walls with vivid imaginations, Padma's struggles with a particularly cranky bookshelf in the library, which Harry advised she try quoting Shakespeare at before taking down a book, and Draco's adulation of the Hufflepuff dormitory, which let out through a little stairway from the cellars into a small walled garden where his House ghost, the Fat Friar, could often be found wandering.

"He's an expert on Hogwarts history," Draco said, eating the brim off of a marzipan hat. "Well, he was when he was alive, and that was hundreds of years ago, so he's been hanging about since then and keeping current."

"He seems nice," Harry agreed. "The Bloody Baron's not much of a help with anything, he just wanders around being creepy. Theo Nott says it adds atmosphere."

"I asked Nearly Headless Nick how the Baron got bloody," Neville put in, scratching his arms. "He said he never asked. I think the other ghosts are scared of him."

"Peeves certainly is," Harry agreed.

"You lived with Muggles, Harry, what are Muggle ghosts like?" Padma asked. Harry shrugged.

"Never met a Muggle ghost. They aren't all that common. There's lots of stories about them, but you almost never see one. Lots of Muggles think they don't exist."

"Weird," Neville said.

"That's Muggles for you," Draco said, a trifle contemptuously.

"They're not so bad," Neville said. "My 'dopted dad Ted's Muggleborn, you know."

"Well, Muggleborn," Draco answered, sneering a little. "I'm talking out and out non-magical Muggles."

"Some of them are awful," Harry agreed, thinking of the Dursleys, now not much more than a distant bad memory. "But they're a nice enough lot on

the whole. They have to do a lot more work than we do, you know."

"Is it true you can ride a bicycle?" Draco asked.

"Sure, it's not hard once you get the trick of it. Sirius taught me."

"Ever been on a broomstick?"

Harry hunched down a little, and was grateful for Snake, twining around his neck affectionately. "Once," he said softly. "The day Peter Pettigrew attacked me."

Neville's hand drifted up to his own collarbone, and his matching scar. The four of them shared a quiet moment lost in their own thoughts, before Draco shrugged.

"I never have. Mum said it was dangerous and a sloppy way to travel, besides. Then again she thinks that about every way to travel," he added.

"Malfoy, don't take this the wrong way, but your mum's a nut," Neville said flatly.

"Yeah," Draco agreed. "She is, a bit. Anyway," he said hurriedly, "You've been on a broomstick Neville, haven't you? And Padma has."

"I've fallen off of them quite a lot," Neville grinned. "Flying's all right, but it's no great shakes if you ask me. I like the Underground much better."

Harry sat quietly, listening to the others talk. Of course he had been thrilled to get the Nimbus 2000 as a gift; it was the best broomstick out there, and everyone knew it. What he hadn't considered was that broomsticks were meant for flying on. The last time he'd been on a broomstick, he'd been chased down and slashed by Peter Pettigrew -- and Sirius had nearly died.

"You play Quidditch at all?" Draco asked Neville, who shrugged.

"Dora and I throw around a Quaffle once in a while," he said casually. "You, Padma?"

"Nah," Padma said. "That's Parvati's game. I like football."

"Football? That's a Muggle sport, isn't it?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. S'brilliant," Padma said, picking up an apple and biting into it to clear out the sugary taste in her mouth.

"Only one ball though," Harry put in. "You can't use your hands, see."

"Yep. You pass it around with your feet, and try to kick it through the goalposts. Have you played, Harry?"

The conversation devolved into the comparative merits of football versus Quidditch, with Harry in the middle; he kept silent, still considering the fact that next week was their first flying lesson, and he'd have to decide whether or not he wanted to sign up. Flying meant Quidditch, which was brilliant; Harry had fond memories of throwing fake Bludgers for the Weasley twins and going to school games with Professor Snape -- the taste of sweet roasted nuts the professor had bought for him, the roar of the crowd, the fascinating speed with which the game was played.

But he also remembered the terrible moment when Peter's curse had hit his broomstick, the fall to the ground and Remus' panicked heartbeat as he ran with Harry in his arms for safety. The splintered remains of his racing broom tumbling out of the sack Alastor Moody carried, and the frightened, closed looks on the adults' faces.

"Guess we should be going," Padma said, when the food was mostly gone. "Bet it'll be a lot harder to sneak back into the dorms than it was to sneak out."

"Might be, but everyone's gone to bed by now, I imagine," Draco yawned. "Have fun at breakfast tomorrow, I'm going to sleep all day."

"We should have a study group," Padma said, and the boys all groaned. "Well, we should. We're in all the same classes, just at different times, and it'd be loads more helpful to have four brains working on things than just one."

"Is that an offer to do my homework for me?" Harry asked with a grin; Padma stuck out her tongue. "All right, why don't we meet in the library after dinner."

"I'll do your Transfigurations for you if you write my Herbology essay," Draco offered, as they cleaned up the apple cores, bits of marzipan, and stray breadcrumbs, and Harry tucked the basket under Neville's bed. He had a feeling the house-elves would come for it on their normal cleaning rounds, but if not, Neville could always bring it back to him tomorrow.

"Nah, I'd better do it myself," Harry sighed. "Might beg a few hints off you, though."

"Some Slytherin you are," Padma teased. "Won't even cheat when someone offers to do your homework for you for real."

Harry lifted his nose in the air, haughtily. "Ambition requires knowledge," he replied, trying to sound like Professor Snape and only managing to

sound as though he had a mild sore throat. Padma was prevented from replying by their emergence into the hallways again. They all stood there for a moment, studying their shoes, and then broke off to go their separate ways.

Professor Snape's door was closed, when Harry passed it on his way to the dormitory, but it looked as though there were candles lit. He considered knocking on the door, to ask why he had been let go and to...say thank-you, or that he hadn't been caught by Filch. He remembered Snape's words about time, however, and waiting for the proper moment; instead he withdrew to the Slytherin dormitory, where his fellow students were fast asleep, Crabbe snoring and Blaise mumbling about lemons and quilts in his dreams.

"Oh, Merlin," Andromeda sighed.

"What is it?" Ted asked, as he set the breakfast table. Remus and Sirius, who had their own kitchen but seemed to prefer the Tonks', looked up from their preparation of breakfast itself. A brown Hogwarts owl had swooped in the open window and dropped a letter on the table for Andromeda, flapping to the perch to share Hedwig and Boudicca's water dish. Andromeda had slit open what appeared, from the spidery handwriting on the front, to be a letter from Neville. "Neville's gone and landed in the infirmary," she announced.

"Infirmary?" Sirius asked, eating a slice of apple. Remus stole the rest of them from the bowl under his hand, and mixed in some bananas on his way to making a fruit salad.

"Yes...boils in Potions class," Andromeda sighed. "He isn't any good at cooking, I did worry about him in Potions."

"The boy could burn tea," Ted agreed, pouring himself a cup as he spoke. "I worry about him in every class. Smart as a whip, you know, but not in your regular conventional schooling ways."

"He always forgets when to put the ingredients in," Andromeda said. Then she nearly choked on a sip of tea. "Not to worry however as Harry has come to see me with Draco and Padma and he left Snake to keep me company and he says he's going to come back this evening because he knows where the kitchens are," she read aloud. "Sirius, your godson is corrupting the boy."

"Sounds to me like he's feeding him up," Sirius answered. "Not to mention teaching him run-on sentences. Did you tell him where the kitchens are?" he asked Remus, who froze in the middle of a bite of banana. "You did!"

"We knew early enough, and I never saw you yelling at Persephone Wellwright for telling us," Remus protested.

"I do hope Harry won't get into trouble for that," Andromeda said. "I suppose if you get a letter from the Headmaster you'll know."

Sirius sank into his chair at the table and rested his head in his hands. "I thought Dumbledore was done yelling at us when we graduated, and then I was sure he was done yelling at us when we moved to Wales..."

"He's certainly a product of your parenting," Ted said with a grin. "Oh, dish me some of that -- lovely, thank you Remus."

Remus set a bowl of the fruit salad in front of Ted and one near Sirius' elbow. He glanced at Andromeda, who shook her head. "He's all right though -- Neville I mean -- isn't he?" he asked.

"Oh, he seems cheerful enough," Andromeda answered. "Then again it's very hard to tell with Neville. He seems to take everything so lightly -- I don't know if it's to keep us from worrying, or because he really doesn't care that he's spent the night in the infirmary."

"Well, obviously Harry's looking out for him," Sirius said approvingly.

"That's true, though I think Harry narrowly missed the same fate, Neville says here they were partners," Andromeda said. "Ted, perhaps we ought to get him some sort of educational aide."

"Like a tutor?" Ted asked. "It's only been a week..."

"I was thinking more like a study guide of some sort. Oh -- perhaps a Remembrall. That'd be useful, wouldn't it? He could keep it with him when he's brewing potions and then if he forgets to add something it'll tell him straight off."

"Never thought those were very useful," Sirius said. "Now, a thing that tells you what you've forgotten --"

"Desk calendar," Remus murmured.

"-- that'd be much more handy." Sirius took on a thoughtful look, as he meditated on the subject. "I'll bet it wouldn't even be that difficult. You'd have to modify the charms a bit, but the essential spell's already on the thing."

Remus saw the look in Sirius' eyes, and sighed. "Shall I pick up a handful when I go out, and you can have fun blowing them up while you try?" he asked.

"I almost never blow anything up," Sirius replied haughtily.

"Going shopping, are you?" Ted asked. "Pick up one for our Neville, then, we've an account at most of the shops in Diagon Alley."

"Job shopping," Remus answered with a smile. "But I'm bound to go into quite a few shops at any rate, so it's no trouble."

"Looking for a job?" Andromeda asked. "Surely you don't actually need one?"

Sirius growled, and Remus grinned at him. "No, not really -- I've my savings from the past few years, which comes to a remarkably tidy sum when one isn't paying rent, but I like to keep busy."

"And your...condition?" Ted asked delicately. "It doesn't harm your chances?"

"Considerably, but then I'm fortunate in that I don't have to take the first job that comes along," Remus said, watching Sirius -- who had once nearly strangled him for starving himself when he couldn't find regular work. "Working as a shop attendant, you know, the hours vary. If all else fails I'll rob Sirius and start a new bookshop."

Sirius dropped his eyes to his breakfast, face carefully blank. "Dunno that I want another one," he said. "When Sandust burned..."

Silence settled over the table, until Remus finally rubbed his forehead and spoke again. "I'll pick up a Remembrall for Neville and a few for Sirius, and if the charm works he'll have the most unique little toy in school. Any other errands need running?"

"Oh -- I have a few things, if you're going by the grocer's," Andromeda said, rising to find the shopping list in the kitchen.

"Oi, Pads," Remus said softly. Sirius looked up at him. "You alright?"

"Useless worry. Must be turning into you," Sirius said, with a small grin, as Remus ate a grape and smiled back.

He returned from his expedition that day with three job applications and half a dozen Remembralls. He said the cost of the things was outrageous, but one of the applications was to Schaeffer's Scholars' Emporium where he'd purchased them, and they weren't the only items in the sack he carried up to the attic. While Sirius happily poked the Remembralls with his wand, muttered reverse-engineering incantations, and ran down to pilfer textbooks from Nymphadora's now-abandoned bookshelf, Remus quietly unpacked bookmarks that told you which page had that quote you wanted to reference, a packet full of sugar-quills to send to Harry, and a set of architecturally-shaped blocks which stuck to each other in whatever order you placed them and changed shape on request.

By the time he'd finished a rather good model of the Pantheon, complete with little statues, Sirius had blown up three of the Remembralls, lacerated himself twice, and gone downstairs again for some of Dora's leftover costume jewelery for some insane reason Remus couldn't fathom. He was just starting on the job applications when Sirius let out a whoop, and a few loose bricks in the Pantheon came undone.

"What've you done now?" Remus inquired, wondering if it was permissible to list one's landlord as a character reference. A small, glittering object arced through the air and he caught it, reflexes moving before his conscious mind had time to think. It turned out to be a little marble, much smaller than a normal Remembrall, with red mist just beginning to fill the centre.

"I kept trying to shrink it without actually thickening the glass any," Sirius said. "but it's all right, because the thick glass magnifies the projection -- see?" he held up another small marble-sized object, and pointed it at the wall. In hazy red letters, the words *Your Anniversary* appeared.

"Did I forget our anniversary?" Sirius asked.

"I didn't realise we had one," Remus replied. "Would you like one?"

"Not really."

"Me either."

Sirius shook his head. "The point is, what's the good of a Remembrall for Potions if you have to pick it up every time you think you've forgotten something? This way -- "

"Oh blast, I was supposed to get eggs for Andromeda," Remus exclaimed, looking down at where the red light was spreading across his palm.

"Moony, do pay attention."

"Deepest apologies, Padfoot," Remus said, setting the marble carefully in the centre of the pantheon and folding his hands to look up at Sirius. "You were saying."

"Quite. This way, see, I've put it on a chain..." he demonstrated, popping the little marble into a rather industrial-looking chain bracelet with one badly bent-out link, "It's always touching his hand and all he has to do is look down and it'll tell him what he's forgotten."

He strapped the chain around his wrist, and the smaller words *"Haircut 1pm"* appeared on the back of his hand. "Bugger, it's past one already, isn't it."

"It's a good idea, though I think the temptation to use it during one's final exams might be a bit much," Remus observed. "Still, can't hurt to send it to

him, and if it's taken away, well, at least we tried."

"Trust Snape to spoil our fun from a hundred miles away," Sirius said, unstrapping the chain. "I'll throw in a note to be careful with it. Let's go show Andromeda," he continued, as excited as any child with a new toy. Remus gave him an indulgent smile and followed him downstairs, pocketing the other miniature Remembrall as he did so. It was difficult to imagine Sirius as an inventor of educational toys...and yet it would be an awfully interesting thing to demonstrate when he turned in his job application.

As he descended the stairs he heard Andromeda laugh with pleasure and Ted's dismayed groan of "I was sure I'd remembered that!"

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 8

Time seemed to pass quickly at Hogwarts; the weekend vanished almost as soon as it had come, and before Harry knew it, the first flying lesson was fast approaching. He still hadn't decided whether to sign up or not; it would be a terrific waste if he never learned to use his Nimbus Two Thousand, but every time he thought about flying, he remembered the crunch as his broomstick shattered under Peter Pettigrew's curse. He suspected that, like the look in Sirius' eyes when he saw Harry's cupboard at the Dursleys' house, it was something which would stay with him all his life.

He thought of writing to Sirius about it, or, more sensibly, to Remus; Sirius would understand, he was sure, but Sirius might shout a bit first. He had nearly decided to write Remus, the morning of the first lesson, when Marcus Flint, the slightly crooked-toothed, cowlick-haired captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, clapped him on the shoulder as he passed.

"Going to learn flying, are you Potter?" he called over his shoulder. "Try not to fall off, eh?"

Harry, bewildered, kept moving towards the Great Hall, when Theo Nott appeared with Crabbe and Goyle trailing him like extremely ugly puppies.

"Finally decided to sign up, Harry?" Theo said.

"Sign up?"

"For flying lessons! You lost me two sickles, I had a bet on with Parkinson that you'd chicken out completely," Theo said. This did not sit well with Harry, who paused as he moved towards the entrance to the Great Hall. Tacked up outside the door were the sign-ups for first-year flying lessons; he'd stopped every day to gaze at it and finger his quill thoughtfully before moving onwards.

There, at the bottom of the list, in a scrawl that certainly wasn't his own, was a name not dissimilar to Hamg PoHer. Or, if one looked closely, Harry Potter.

"Malfoy," he muttered under his breath, recognising the uneven, childish handwriting. An arm draped itself across his shoulders, and Neville grinned at him, slapping his back.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I didn't put your name down. Can't back out now though. It'd be dishonourable."

"I'm allowed to punch Draco in the head though, right?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, well, you could," Neville allowed, "so long as it was the front of the head and not the back of the head, so he could see you coming. That's chivalry," he added. "Making sure the other chap knows what you're up to."

"That's stupid," Harry replied. "If I'm going to punch someone, I'm not going to tell them so first."

"Slytherin," Neville said, with a roll of his eyes as they entered the Great Hall.

"Gryffindor!"

"See you at flying practice!" Neville cried loudly, leaving Harry to walk to the already-crowded Slytherin table alone.

"Suck on it!" Harry called back.

"That's the spirit, Potter," said a fifth-year girl with straw-coloured hair and shifty dark eyes. "Gryffindors are good for two things -- being insulted and being defeated."

There was a titter of laughter around her, and Harry stared at her with what he hoped were impassive and Snapelike eyes.

"And good for telling the truth, and good for standing up for their mates, and good for helping each other out," he added. "Good for quite a bit, really," he said, in a more thoughtful manner.

"Mind your tongue, firstie," she snapped.

"I bet if you let Oliver Wood help you in Charms you wouldn't be getting letters from your parents about your marks," Harry said, in his most polite voice. "I hear he's top of the Gryffindor-Slytherin class in Charms."

"Oliver Wood is a Quidditch-mad git," she said fiercely.

"Watch how you talk about Quidditch," Marcus Flint said, and the girl fell suddenly silent. "And you, Potter, no lip to the fifth years if you want to survive to be one. Don't think just because you're going to be riding broomsticks means you're anything more than a pipsqueak of a first-year with a funny scar."

Harry's nerves settled a bit now that he'd made some trouble for the fifth-year who talked about his friends that way. With a nod to Flint, he set to eating, though the food was dry and tasteless in his mouth. He was going to have to get on a broomstick this afternoon and try to fly; not his broomstick, since that was a secret, but a broomstick nonetheless.

It was times like these that made being the Boy Who Lived difficult; everyone would be watching him, expecting him to be brilliant -- or expecting him to fail, if they were particularly jealous. He'd heard the expectancy in the tone of the editorial Remus sent him about his going into Slytherin; bad enough Sirius' letter had been falsely cheerful and polite and full of platitudes about the House of Black being Slytherin, as if Harry didn't know what Sirius thought of the House of Black. His letters since were better, but Harry knew he'd somehow hurt his godfather, and now he had to be good at everything, to make Sirius proud again.

Draco, a few tables away, caught Harry's eye and gave him a hesitant, timid grin; Harry scowled, and stabbed his egg viciously with his fork.

It was a beautiful clear afternoon by the time they trooped out of the school and down to the smooth, level field near the Forbidden Forest, where the flying lessons were being held. Neville and Padma flanked Harry firmly, as if daring him to try and bolt; Neville must have figured it out somehow, since he hadn't confided to either of them just how terrified he was. Draco ran ahead, school robes flying out behind him as though he were already on a broomstick. It was the sort of day Sirius used to say was perfect for flying, usually while looking longingly at his then-earthbound motorbike. The sort of day Harry would go down to the river and draw, or skim stones and fish with Padfoot, while Remus drowsed over a book on the bank.

There were two neat rows of broomsticks already laid out, and Harry cast an experienced eye over them; it might have been two years since he was a part of the Wizarding world, but once he had been as expert as any eight-year-old could be about broomsticks, from endless hours reading Quidditch magazines with Ron. Ron was there, in fact, and gave Harry a friendly wave from the knot of Gryffindors following him.

"Come to learn how to fly properly, Weasley?" came a taunt from behind Harry, and he turned to see Theo arriving. "Reckon you've never seen a broomstick as nice as these old school brooms. You probably have to use some old straw broom your grandmother handed down to you -- "

"Shut it, Theo," Harry ordered, and Theo looked surprised; Harry imagined he hadn't noticed him, and the dismay in his face spoke volumes.

"None of us have got our own brooms now, anyway," he said. "So it's all down to skill, isn't it?"

"I'd be careful how I talk, in that case," Padma added. "Weasley boys always make Quidditch team."

Harry saw Ron flush, out of the corner of his eye, but Hermione Granger had stepped up next to Padma, and crossed her arms. "And if we're all equal, Nott, then that means if he flies better than you, he's just more talented, doesn't it?"

Theo sneered a bit. "Staunch defenders," he said, though he didn't say it as loudly as before. "Do you always get girls to speak for you, Weasley?"

Ron surged forward and Neville and Draco caught him by the arms; Harry had his wand out to hex Theo before he knew what he was thinking, and only the arrival of Madam Hooch stopped him. She was a tall, graceful woman, with short, feathery grey hair and peculiar yellow eyes; they reminded Harry of a hawk -- one that was circling prey.

"What's this, what's this?" she demanded, and Harry shoved his wand back in his pocket, while Neville muttered a warning of some kind in Ron's ear. "Right then, places please."

Neville, one hand still on Ron's arm, guided him into place, and the rest of them formed up; only Draco, dusting himself off after scuffling with Ron, was still in the middle, straightening his tie.

"Places, please," Madam Hooch repeated, and Draco looked up, yelped, and slid shamefacedly into the only empty space -- between Harry and Susan Bones, who gave him a quick smile.

It was a vaguely familiar process to Harry, when Madam Hooch explained it: simply hold your hand out over the broom and say "up!" in a firm, commanding tone. He'd done it for his own broomstick, years ago, and once or twice one of the Twins had let him try starting theirs.

Harry's voice cracked the first time he tried, and he looked around embarrassed, but only Parvati had managed to get her broom in the air on the first try. He swallowed, licked his lips, and said "UP!" louder than he meant to --

And the broomstick smacked into his hand.

"Cool," Draco said enviously, and straightened his shoulders, trying again. Across from them, Neville and Hermione both managed to get theirs to float, and grabbed them firmly.

The wood was smooth under his hand, worn down by hundreds of Hogwarts students before him. Harry swallowed bile, remembering his old broomstick.

"You look ill," Blaise whispered. "Something wrong?"

"Bad eggs at lunch, I think," Harry whispered back.

"Don't throw up on me."

"You're all heart, Zabini."

Madam Hooch was moving up and down the rows, showing students how to sit a broom properly, correcting grips, and reassuring Draco, who was having a bit of difficulty holding onto his.

"Boy sits a broom like a natural," Sirius had said, his enormous, capable hands holding the broomstick steady and Harry with it. Harry remembered a warm palm on the small of his back, and the unequaled sensation of freedom when Sirius finally let him fly.

"Yes, you're quite a natural at this, Mr. Potter," Madam Hooch said. "Just adjust your hands a little, there -- Ms. Abbot, come see how Potter's done it."

Harry, finding himself already astride the broom, held carefully still as Hannah and Draco both inspected his grip. He could feel the broom's impatience to be aloft, and it was all he could do to keep his feet on the ground, desperate not to fly until everyone else was.

Then Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and everyone kicked off, Harry a little after the others. Susan and Draco both shouted in pleased surprise when they found themselves more than ten feet off the ground, but Padma rose with a steady calm that Harry envied; Ron and Neville seemed just as composed.

"Come up then, Harry!" Neville called, as Harry hovered a few feet below the others, calculating precisely how high he could go before he would break something when he fell.

If he fell. If he fell.

Which he wouldn't. He was James Potter's son and Sirius Black's godson. He could feel the weight, even now, of Sirius' little Remembrall in his pocket. He set his jaw and rose another few feet, until he was level with Draco, who was kicking his heels in an effort to go higher.

Madam Hooch showed them how to move forward and backwards, how to rise and drop and steer simple curves, seemingly everywhere at once as she steadied uncertain flyers or stopped Crabbe and Goyle from flying into each other on purpose. Harry, who spent most of his time trying to hover just out of sight of Madam Hooch until he felt more secure, noted with pride that Ron actually was flying circles around Theo, who seemed to have stalled out somehow, like a boat with no rudder or oars.

"Look, Sirius!" he'd cried, rising above the hedges but looking only at his godfather, who had crossed his arms and was staring up at him approvingly. Down below somewhere, Ron and Ginny and the twins were running around underneath him, cheering.

"Aren't you having fun, Harry?" Draco asked, pulling up next to him. "Look, even Neville's enjoying himself..."

Harry glanced over to where Padma was steadying Neville after a near fall. Neville grinned and gave him two thumbs up, then grabbed frantically for the broomstick again.

"I think I'll finish up," Harry said. "Coming back to earth with me?"

"Not on your life! Come on Harry, it's great! You've hardly moved. You race me and you'll see."

"Draco, I don't really want to -- " Harry stopped; Draco had plunged his hand into Harry's pocket and come up with three sickles and the miniaturised Remembrall that Sirius had sent him when Neville's remembrall-bracelet had arrived (to much acclaim; Harry had already written to Sirius with demands for five more).

"Give that back, Malfoy!" Harry shouted.

"Without hands now," Sirius had said, and Harry had held his arms out carefully to the sides like a tightrope walker, feeling coiled power in the magic that drove the broomstick. He balanced perfectly, and Sirius smiled down at him, approval in every line of his face.

"Come and get it," Draco said, with a wicked grin, and raced off on his broom. Harry shot after him without thinking, weaving through the rest of the flying students as Draco dodged between Hannah and Goyle, then rose up above the crowd.

Dimly, in the background, Harry heard Madam Hooch shouting for them to come down and join the class again, but he was concentrating on Draco, Harry gaining speed as the other boy's broom began to, for lack of a better word, sputter. Draco turned suddenly, still clutching the Remembrall tightly, and Harry was right on his tail; another sharp turn, to the left and up forty-five degrees at the same time, but Harry was taking his lead from the way Draco's broomstick-bristles pointed, and didn't hesitate to follow.

"Catch me!" Draco called, over his shoulder, and Harry ducked tighter against his broomstick, inching up on the other boy. Now he was level with his bristles, now with his shoes; he reached out and grabbed Draco's robe.

Draco, surprised by the sudden movement, shouted and jerked; both brooms skewed sideways and Harry saw Sirius' tiny Remembrall slip through Draco's fingers.

"You dropped it!" he shouted at Draco, who looked stunned.

"I'm sorry!" Draco answered, but Harry barely heard it; he pointed his broomstick nearly straight down, remembering to grip with his knees and crossed ankles as he'd seen a Gryffindor Quidditch player do once, and dove after it.

For a minute the world went away, and there was just Harry, matching speed with a tiny glass ball, and a blur of blue that was the sky, a blur of green that was the grass, and suddenly stone -- he was skimming the outside wall of the castle, the masonry barely six inches from his knees.

It was like the one time Sirius had opened up the motorbike on the roads just outside of Betwys Beddau; Remus would have killed them both if he'd ever found out, but when they hit ninety miles an hour the wind stole your breath and every curve was an adventure waiting to happen, and Harry had never felt so alive.

Like that.

Only better.

He saw windows flashing past and heard paper rustle as the wake of his speed blew late-summer air through the windows; all this he remembered later, because at the moment his entire being was focused on the little glass ball....

Six feet from the ground and he pulled up, leaning over to snatch it before it impacted, and the speed he'd already had took him thirty or forty feet before he skewed to a stop, and hovered, the Remembrall cool in his palm.

The sudden lack of wind in his ears made the world seem very silent, as he realised what he'd done. Most of the other students were on the ground; Draco was descending slowly, looking stunned.

What he'd done had probably broken about half a dozen school rules; disobeying a professor, for a start. He looked around for Madam Hooch, and saw her standing, frozen in amazement, near the front gate of Hogwarts.

Professor Snape was standing next to her, looking breathless and somewhat rushed, as though he'd just come running from somewhere.

"Oh, bollocks," Harry whispered. He wasn't sure whether he ought to go to them, or wait for their wrath to descend. Either way, he'd better get off the broomstick. He lowered himself to the ground, slowly, and the full impact of what he had done didn't hit until his toes touched soil.

He'd done it. He'd flown above every other student in the class and done a dive that would have made Sirius whoop with joy. And he hadn't been afraid at all.

No, it wasn't him -- Draco had made him do it.

That boy needed a serious talking-to.

When he touched down, Madam Hooch seemed to snap out of her shock, and began to descend the steps, moving faster the closer she got. Professor Snape was on her heels; she stopped when she reached Draco, while Snape continued past her. He came up short in front of Harry, staring in a way that made Harry distinctly uncomfortable.

"Show me," he ordered. Harry held out his hand, and the little Remembrall glittered in the sunlight. Red light on Harry's palm showed the words Don't Break School Rules. Harry thought he saw Professor Snape's lips twitch slightly.

"That dive," he said, with an odd sort of urgency. "How high were you when it began?"

"I don't -- " Harry swallowed. "Above the spire of Gryffindor Tower at least."

"And by the time you reached the ground..." Snape's gaze intensified, eyes almost sparking, until he abruptly turned away.

"Madam Hooch," he announced. She looked up from where she was haranguing a terrified Draco. "I will deal with Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy, if you prefer."

She looked relieved. "As you wish, Professor Snape."

Snape caught Harry by the arm, not too roughly, and hauled him forward; Harry tossed his broom to Neville as they passed and Snape hooked his other hand in the crook of Draco's elbow. He led them swiftly up and into the entryway, stopping just before the second set of doors that let out onto the courtyard.

"Get out of here," he said to Draco, releasing him. Draco stared up at him, confused. "Thank your surname and go," Snape snapped. Draco looked as confused as Harry felt, but he scuttled away, with a backwards look of sympathy for Harry. Snape led Harry onward, muttering to himself. "Never in ten years at Hogwarts -- might have killed you both -- lucky not to be expelled -- "

At least, Harry thought, it was probably a good sign that Snape was talking about not expelling them.

They stopped in front of the History of Magic classroom, and Snape threw the door open, leaving Harry outside while he stepped in.

"Professor Binns, I wonder if I might borrow Flint and Bole," he said, and Binns waved the two boys on. Snape shut the door behind them, and the two bewildered fifth-years stared at Harry, who realised he probably looked even more windblown and disheveled than usual.

"Bole, you're fired," Snape said, without preamble. For some inexplicable reason, Bole looked relieved. "Please inform Stimpson you are to replace him as Beater, and he can find something else to do, preferably something which requires little movement and no skill."

As Bole left, apparently to track down Stimpson immediately, Snape turned to Marcus Flint, who was now eyeing Harry with more shrewdness than Harry was accustomed to seeing from him. Snape's hand thrust Harry forward, towards Flint.

"Potter will be your Seeker," Snape said bluntly. Harry nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Is he any good, or just a golden boy?" Flint asked. Snape looked as though he'd like to slap the Quidditch Captain.

"Slytherin plays to win. I would not handicap you with an idiot, if I had another choice," Snape growled. "The boy did a dive from Gryffindor Tower and caught this -- " he held up the Remembrall, " -- at the bottom of it."

"He's built for it," Flint allowed. Harry, through a haze of surprise, decided mildly that this might not be a compliment, but Snape's words drowned out most rational thought -- Potter will be your Seeker. "He'll need a decent broom -- "

"I've got one," Harry blurted. Both of them stared at him. "My godfather..."

"Black," Snape said, almost resignedly. "Breaking the rules as usual. What is it then? A Cleansweep of some kind?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand," Harry said shyly. Flint goggled at him.

"With a broomstick like that he doesn't need talent," he said.

"Thanks," Harry managed, scowling.

"I want him ready to win at the first game," Snape said to Flint, ignoring Harry for the moment. "If you need special accomodation, notify me at once."

Flint's smile turned slightly predatory at that, but he nodded.

"Back to class with you," Snape said, and Flint ducked back into the classroom. Snape and Harry stood there, both slightly breathless, for a moment.

"Professor," Harry said finally.

"What is it?"

"Are you going to punish Malfoy?"

"No."

"What did you mean when you told him to thank his surname?" Harry pressed.

"You are to practice hard," Snape replied. "Don't think because you're about to become the youngest Quidditch player in a century that you can slack off. You'll be playing against larger, faster, and quite possibly smarter opponents."

Harry realised he wasn't going to get an answer, so instead he settled for "Yes, sir."

"You've been spared a punishment. I'd appreciate it if you didn't noise the fact about. Tell Mr. Malfoy to do the same."

"Yes, sir."

"Go find him, now," Snape continued. "Flint will notify you about your first practice session."

And he walked off, towards the stairs that would lead to the dungeon, just as classes began to let out all over the castle. Harry stood in the hallway, bumped and buffeted by the crowds, before dashing off towards the Great Hall, to find Draco and share the good news.

Dear Sirius,

Thank you for your letter yesterday and the spare quill Remus sent, I don't know how I lose them so quick. I think Nevilles been nicking them off of me. Tell Remus hi and that I'm writing a letter to him next so he shouldn't feel left out, but this news could not wait and I am very glad Hedwig is here because she fly's a lot faster than the school owls and I'm not allowed to go to the postoffice in Hogsmeade.

This afternoon I had quite a grand adventure and you will never guess whats happened...

"Warugh!"

Sirius ducked as a letter came flying at his head in the middle of the crowded restaurant, and an exhausted Hedwig landed on the white-linen-covered table, flapping a little and immediately wandering over to Remus' soup. Andromeda nearly spilled her wine.

"Goodness," she said. "What's Hedwig doing delivering mail here?"

Sirius plucked the letter off of his steak, and turned it over in his hands. "Harry must have told her it was important."

"It's his second week of school; if it's not from Hogwarts itself how important can it be?" Remus asked, sighing and pushing his soup towards Hedwig.

"It's not very good soup," Nymphadora told the owl, who hooted and continued to worry a bit of cooked chicken she'd found in the bowl.

"You know kids," Sirius said. "Everything's life-and-death when you're eleven."

"Excuse me, sir..." said a waiter, hesitantly. "We don't allow owls in the establishment..."

"Of course, I'll just send her home -- " Remus lifted Hedwig off the tablecloth and she took the hint, ruffling her feathers in annoyance and flapping off out of the restaurant again, through the wide, open windows that looked onto Sosi Alley, the dining district above Knockturn Alley and Gringotts Bank.

The other patrons were staring.

"Everything all right?" Ted asked, worriedly, as Sirius' face drained of colour. He was gripping the letter and reading intently, but he didn't look upset; if anything, he looked jubilant. After a second read, he folded it slowly, and tucked it -- steak-juice stain and all -- into his pocket. He signaled the waiter.

"Champagne, please," he said. "Quickly."

"Sirius, stop indulging in melodrama," Remus ordered.

"Wait for it," Sirius answered, with a vague grin in Remus' direction.

"He's gone bats," Nymphadora whispered, to her father.

"He's been bats," Andromeda answered.

"Quiet," Sirius said, as the champagne arrived. He poured five glasses, then held his up.

"To my godson," he said with a grin, "The new Slytherin House Team Seeker."

Nymphadora grinned gleefully and lifted her glass; Andromeda and Ted followed with theirs a second later, but Remus just sat and stared.

"Seeker?" he demanded. Sirius drained his glass and grinned. "Harry's a Seeker? For the House team?"

"Says so in his letter. Says Snape appointed him himself. I told you the boy was a natural! I told you that broomstick'd be a good investment!" Sirius said jubilantly.

"He's a first-year," Ted put in. "How on earth did he get on the Quidditch team?"

"He's my godson," Sirius said, proudly. "Of course he made the team."

"But he's a Slytherin!" Nymphadora observed. "Does this mean we have to start rooting for Slytherin to win games?"

"Oh dear," Remus murmured.

"We won't worry about who he's playing for right now," Sirius declared. "Come on then -- " he filled his glass again. "To Harry!"

This time they all lifted their glasses in unison. "To Harry!"

Sirius took the letter out and passed it to Remus, who read it and smiled. "Good for him," he said warmly, now that the shock had passed. "He can catch a Snitch and fly a broomstick, even if he hasn't yet mastered apostrophes."

"I'm having that letter framed," Sirius answered. "Look, Andromeda, see right here. Professor Snape says I'm the youngest Quidditch Player in a century and Padma says hes right, so I shall probably get tossed about quite a bit because all the other Seekers are much bigger than I am, but I'm not afraid of a few bruises."

"Good for him," Nymphadora said.

"He's going to get killed," Remus added. "He'll probably enjoy it though." He paused for a minute. "James always did."

"The bigger the bruise, the better the fame," Sirius replied. "I remember."

"I wonder what Severus thinks of James Potter's son playing for Slytherin," Andromeda mused.

"They're bloody lucky to have him, that's what he'd better be thinking," Sirius retorted. He gestured for another bottle of champagne. "But we are not going to think about rooting for Slytherin tonight. Tonight," he said, gesturing for the waiter to pour this time, "we are going to celebrate!"

"Remind me to pick up some Pepper Up on the way home," Remus murmured to Nymphadora, who grinned at him.

"You'll need it when I show him the Slytherin pennant I'm going to give you two," she agreed, and Remus laughed.

By the time they reached the Portkey-doorway to Tonks&Tonks, Remus was half-carrying Sirius on his shoulder, and Andromeda's cheeks were cheerfully pink; Sirius and Ted were animatedly reliving the Quidditch matches of their youth, and Nymphadora had nipped down to the late-night grocers to pick up some Pepper-Up, a handful of Sickles pressed into her hands by a relatively-sober Remus.

Irene, Andromeda's assistant, was just locking up, and she grinned and stood aside to let them enter as Dora scurried back, waving the packet cheerfully. She led the way inside and clattered up the stairs to deposit her purchase in the kitchen. Andromeda and Ted followed more sedately, and they could hear Irene locking the door after them and her footsteps down the pavement. Just before Remus reached the staircase, Sirius skewed ahead of him and wrapped one arm around his waist, beaming.

"Hiya Moony," he said, and kissed Remus' nose. Remus wrinkled it and rubbed at the tickling sensation; Sirius hadn't shaved before dinner, and his chin and cheeks were rough. "Hey!"

"Hey what?" Remus asked, the champagne affecting him just enough to stop him caring that they were necking at the bottom of the stairs.

"Nothing," Sirius answered, and kissed him thoroughly. Remus tasted champagne and kissed back; when it ended, Sirius pulled him a little closer, hands straying lower on his back, and Remus realised if they weren't careful they were going to end up performing indecent acts in the stairwell. He glanced sideways and saw Andromeda watching them from the stairs, a small smile on her face.

"All right, Andromeda?" he asked softly, and she coloured a little more. Sirius glanced up, grinned, and nuzzled Remus' cheek. Andromeda descended the stairs and kissed Sirius on the forehead.

"You can know a thing," she said, "and never really know what you're going to think of it until you see it."

Remus, unsure, held Sirius' head against his neck and smiled faintly.

"I'm glad you make him happy," she said.

"Me too," Remus answered.

"What're you going on about then?" Sirius demanded, into his throat.

"Nothing, Sirius," Andromeda said, turning to go. "Come upstairs, before you make a spectacle of yourself."

"Wasn't making a spectacle," Sirius said.

"Sirius, you've got your hand -- " Remus began, hoping Andromeda hadn't seen that.

"Oh." Sirius looked sheepish, then -- in a nearly unparalleled feat -- transmuted it into a wicked grin. "Shall we continue making a spectacle upstairs?"

Harry nearly fell asleep in Potions the next day; between the excitement of his first flight in two years, making Quidditch team, and anticipation of Sirius' return letter, he couldn't get to sleep the night before. Eventually he had begun to listen for the sounds of sleep from the other boys, and when he was sure they wouldn't notice, he crept out of bed and opened his trunk.

His Nimbus Two Thousand lay in its special hidden compartment, and he lifted it out as quietly as possible; he wondered if he'd still be able to fly when he wasn't chasing furiously after Draco. Hesitantly, he laid it on the ground and whispered "up!" as loudly as he dared. It sprang up into his hand, solidly, much less skittish than the old school broom.

Oh, it was beautiful. Almost too beautiful to ride.

He carefully climbed onto the broom and tugged gently; it responded easily, lifting him up off the floor of the dormitory, and drifting him gently towards the window high in the wall, which let out barely a foot above ground level, and was just wide enough for a thin eleven-year-old to fit through. He unlatched it, hands shaking in the moonlight -- it would be Full Moon soon, and he'd send Remus a nice long letter for him to read while he recuperated.

Once he'd squeezed through the window, the broom seemed to sense somehow that they were free; he rose quickly, the chest-constricting fear of this afternoon banished in the feel of the wind blowing through his disordered hair.

He'd spent hours flying, learning the feel of the broomstick, how to pick up or drop speed, how to do simple tricks like loop-de-loops and a barrel roll that made his glasses fall off; he dove, squinting, catching just a hint of light reflected in the lenses, and grabbed them instinctively. He hadn't come half as close to the ground as he had with the Remembrall, he saw, when he put them back on. The Nimbus had superior speed, superior handling...it was, simply, superior.

He didn't return to the Slytherin dormitory until the sun was peeking over the horizon, and he'd barely managed to get the broomstick into its compartment again before he fell into bed for an hour or two. In Potions, Neville had to keep poking him to keep him awake, but they did manage not to melt any cauldrons, and Professor Snape didn't seem to notice Harry dozing off with his chin on his hand. If he did, he didn't comment.

At lunch, while he tried not to fall asleep into his sandwich, he got good-natured jibes from the Weasley twins about hitting bludgers his way, and not-so-good-natured glares from some of the Slytherin team, who clearly didn't think he was up to it. Still, Harry wasn't afraid, and just after lunch Hedwig flapped into the Great Hall with a jubilant letter from Sirius, congratulating him with a proud tone even Harry couldn't dismiss. He wondered how Sirius and Remus were going to take to rooting for Slytherin, and he was sure Remus was wondering too, though Sirius sounded too swept up in the excitement to consider it.

At the High Table, he saw Professor Snape looking...well, if he was to be honest, rather smug. Professor McGonagall looked downright murderous; but then Harry knew Gryffindor had been after the Quidditch Cup for years, and Slytherin was their main competition. Surely he alone couldn't annoy her so much, though; she had no idea if he was any good, or any sort of competition for the new Gryffindor Seeker, tapped just this year.

Harry had the sudden presentiment that, while Quidditch could be the best time of his life, it was also about to make said life infinitely more difficult.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 9

Harry's first Quidditch practice came the Sunday after his first flying lesson, and was unsurprisingly public; Marcus Flint had cleared the Quidditch pitch, but all the other players were notified, and they had taken up positions in the stands. Harry knew why they were there: to laugh at him. He'd heard the talk in the common room -- indeed, they'd made no secret of their contempt for a first-year on their team -- and he didn't blame them for being skeptical. Still, Professor Snape had justified himself to Harry: he wouldn't endanger the team's standing unless Harry was worth his time, and whether or not Flint believed that, Harry did.

Flint explained the game to him as though Harry had never seen a Snitch before, and Harry waited patiently as the balls were unpacked from their trunk. When Flint set a Bludger at him and tossed him the short, round Beating bat, Harry backhanded the Bludger beautifully over the castle, and the talking and jeering and laughing from the Slytherins in the stands ended suddenly.

"Some of the village boys and I played cricket," Harry explained. Flint stared at him dumbly.

"Cricket?"

"It's a game with bats."

Flint was about to say something, when the Bludger came pelting back, and only Harry's quick point over his shoulder drew his attention to catching the rogue ball. He grunted as he leapt on top of it, wrestling it into the trunk. He strapped it back down, and gave Harry a more measured look than before.

"On your broomstick then," he ordered. Harry mounted up, and on Flint's command, showed them what he was capable of; a few jeers returned, and Harry resolved to find a book on stunt-flying in the library.

"Look out, doxie, I'm not going to let the Snitch out 'cause you'll lose it," Flint said, and Harry recognised a golf-ball batted his way with the discarded Beater's bat. He stretched out his palm and caught it easily, zinging it back at Flint. It nailed him in the chest, and the boy bared his teeth. The other Slytherins laughed, this time at their captain.

The next golf ball was wide, but Harry had a Nimbus, and he reached it easily before it hit the ground. The third came on the heels of the second and Harry had to dart up quickly, but it was becoming evident that he'd impressed Flint as much as he'd angered him, and his captain wasn't playing to an audience anymore; he was training a Seeker.

Two hours and innumerable golf-balls later -- or rather, the same twelve, fetched and accio'd repeatedly -- Flint called him down, and Harry descended slowly and reluctantly, reaching him about the same time the rest of the team did. He stood, holding his broomstick expectantly, while Flint closed the trunk and ordered the Beaters to carry it back.

"You'll do," he said, as they started back towards Hogwarts, smacking Harry in the back of the head. Harry took it in the spirit it was meant; he remembered the Slytherins roughhousing with each other when he'd been a visitor to Hogwarts years before. "You're not trained, but you'll do. Another few lessons like that, and you can join regular team practice with the big boys."

"Hope you're going to work on his flying," Bole said, grunting under one end of the trunk, while Derrick hauled the other. "Kid's got a great stick between his legs and no idea how to use it."

The rest of them snickered at this, and it took Harry a minute to realise the joke.

"You'd know, Bole," Flint drawled, and Bole grunted again. This time Harry had no idea what they were talking about, but it didn't really matter. He was going to play Quidditch. He was going to get to do what they'd done today, on a regular basis, for Team and House Glory. If he practiced hard they could get all the way to the House Cup, and Sirius and Remus could come watch him play....

He was distracted from these thoughts by their arrival at the school, and the appearance seemingly from nowhere of Professor Snape.

"Flint," he said, by way of greeting. His eyes swept the rest of them, then settled on Harry. "Has your team passed judgement?"

"He's got potential," Flint replied. "He needs training. I'll want the pitch next Friday afternoon."

"If you have difficulty obtaining it, see me," Snape answered calmly.

"Yes, sir," Flint replied.

"Potter, I would like to see you in my office after your training session next Friday," Snape said. "Four-thirty should suffice."

"Yes, sir," Harry answered, hyper-aware of the rest of the team, now, and wondering what they thought of all this.

"Excellent," Snape said, standing aside. They trooped past him and into the entryway, Derrick and Bole breaking off to return the trunk to its storage room while the rest of them headed for the common room. Harry hung back, and once the others had descended the stairs to the dungeon,

he turned and made for the Great Hall, regardless of his disheveled, sweaty state.

"Harry!" Padma shouted, waving at him as she arrived also. "I was hoping you'd come early to dinner. Draco and Neville are on their way. How was your practice?"

"Brilliant, once they realised I wasn't an idiot," Harry answered, as Neville and Draco appeared at the far end of the hall. "Are we early enough to eat together?"

"Looks that way!" Draco said, cheerfully. "How was it, Harry?"

"Are you really going to play?" Neville added, leading the way into the Great Hall. The food wasn't even out yet; a house-elf at the far end, who was polishing the high table, squeaked and vanished. The four of them sat at one end of the Gryffindor table, heads bent together so that their voices didn't echo so much in the high-ceilinged Hall.

"I think so. Flint says I have potential," Harry said. "And besides, Professor Snape fired someone from the team. It'd be awfully embarrassing if he backed me out now. Plus Sirius would strangle him. He's really just looking for an excuse."

"Why do you suppose they hate each other?" Neville asked.

"Professor Snape never told you anything?"

"Nope."

"Sirius doesn't talk about it either, and Remus says it's not his place, except to tell me that it's idiotic for two grown men to still be mad at each other over stupid things they did when they were too young to know any better." Harry looked dubious. "Sirius doesn't usually do stupid things. Well, not hurtful stupid things."

Draco opened his mouth to say something, then stared over Harry's shoulder. Harry turned to see one of the house-elves, laden with a tray of steaming plates.

"Merion is bringing dinner," she squeaked, setting the tray down in front of them. Four bowls of hot spaghetti and meatballs, with a plate of toasted garlic bread, greeted them. "Denbigh who is head of the kitchens is noticing that Master Draco and Harry Potter and Mister Neville Longbottom and Miss Padma Patil are eating early. Denbigh is sending Merion with food for Master Draco and Harry Potter and -- "

"Thank you, Merion," Draco said, gently cutting her off. She squealed and beamed at him. "That was very kind of you and Denbigh. May we have some cheese?"

Merion hopped excitedly. "Cheese!" she said, and disappeared, appearing hardly a second later with an enormous block of parmesan cheese and a grater.

Harry and Neville exchanged amused grins as Merion grated cheese onto their dishes for them, did a funny little bow, and vanished.

"A girl could get used to service like this," Padma said, breaking her garlic bread in half.

"They must have been watching us," Draco said.

"Oh yeah -- they all know about you, apparently," Harry agreed, around a mouthful of spaghetti. "I guess one of your elves told them to look after you."

Draco looked alarmed. "They did?"

"Yeah -- what's wrong?"

"Oh, if mum finds out she'll make them broil their feet or something," Draco said worriedly. "Merion!" he called, into the air. "Merion!"

She appeared with a pop, looking worried. "Is Master Draco's food cold?"

"Merion, have my house-elves been visiting you?"

She wrung her hands. "Yes?"

"You must tell Mendy and Dobby not to visit you. If my mum finds out it'll go very hard on them."

Merion looked relieved. "Oh, no, Master Draco! Mendy is being very careful. Oh yes. The mistress will not find out!"

Draco gave her a doubtful look. She smiled encouragingly.

"Master Draco is very good to worry about house-elves, but we is visiting each other all the time and not getting caught. Master Draco mustn't be concerned."

"All right then. See that you don't," Draco said. "Get caught, I mean. Thank you, Merion."

She bowed again and disappeared, and Draco bent to his food with a more hearty appetite.

"You've got two house-elves?" Padma asked, eyes wide.

"Nine actually," Draco replied. "It's silly really, half of them haven't even anything to do, but -- "

"Nine?" Neville demanded.

"Yeah...well, we had ten, but one of them got clothed for letting traveling salesmen into the house..." Draco made a face. "Shame really, the salesmen were fun to talk to."

"Anyway, Harry," Neville broke in, "we want to come watch your next practice, but Draco says he won't cos the Slytherins'll squash us."

Draco blushed.

"They probably would," Harry agreed. "You're the enemy now. I mean. You might tell the other captains what we're doing, and that's no good. I know you wouldn't, cos you're my mates..."

"You going to tell us what you did, then?" Neville asked. "Come on Harry. We won't tell."

Harry grinned and began telling them about the lesson, complete with visual aides in the form of stray meatballs reorganised into representing Quidditch balls and flown around with a hasty leviosa charm, while Harry played himself with a bit of garlic bread on a fork. By the time they were nearly done with their meal, the rest of the school was beginning to appear, and they dispersed to their separate tables to finish, carrying their plates with them.

Harry passed the week itching to be on a broomstick again, but he was mindful of last week's Potions lesson, and didn't dare venture out for another night flight. He did get a book from the library on tactical flying, and there was Thursday afternoon's lesson, of course; he spent a good half the class with the book held open with one hand, trying to figure out the precise movement of hands and feet that would allow him to feint, dive, and corner with precision. He was going to impress Flint with his flying abilities or die trying.

It was the "die trying" bit that worried him. The phrase became decidedly literal when one was atop a stick fifty feet above the ground.

Friday came, however, no matter how much Harry worried privately, and while the others spread blankets on the lawn and had a picnic, Harry and Flint trooped down to the Pitch to practice. This time only Bole, who had been Seeker before, and Montague, one of the Chasers, showed up to watch, and their silent stares were nearly worse than the half-meant jeers of the last practice.

Harry hoped his improved flying would impress Flint, but his Captain didn't seem to be paying attention to that. Instead, he got Bole on a broomstick too, and set them Seeking against each other.

It would have been an interesting challenge, except that Bole inexplicably kept breaking the rules, and Flint kept ignoring his blatant defiance of them -- the fouling, the off-sides flying, the early-starts when Flint made them wait and take off at the same time. Harry was bewildered by this, until Flint began shouting at him to keep up or fail, and Harry realised they were trying to train him into cheating, too.

He scowled, and began marking where Flint hit the golf balls; Sirius had taught him that it wasn't cheating if you were using your brain when other people weren't, and Harry had discovered just how little some people used theirs. It didn't take him long to notice a pattern in Flint's hits, and soon he could predict where the next ball would go, and outrun Bole to it every time, given the predictable head start. After forty minutes of this, it all got rather tedious.

Bole seemed to think so too; he signaled to Flint to hold off, and both of them descended to the Pitch.

"It's like he knows where it's going to go," Bole complained. "Come off it, he's beating me every time and I'm using every dirty trick I know."

"You haven't cast an obfuscation charm, have you?" Flint demanded. "Spellwork during a match is grounds for forfeit."

"If he did, he was subtle about it at least," Bole said approvingly.

"I know the rules," Harry said staunchly. "Since you kept trying to make me break 'em."

"There's a lot of leeway on some of those," Flint replied sternly, "and Slytherins -- "

"Play to win, I know," Harry answered.

"How'd you do it then?" Bole was still clearly perplexed that a first-year had out-flown him, and a Muggle-raised first-year at that.

"Why should I tell you?" Harry asked, insulted.

"Now that's the Slytherin spirit," Flint said. "Fine, tighten up your cornering and you can practice with the team starting week after next. Go on then, we're done here."

Flint looked like he was simply tired of hitting golf balls, and Harry wondered how a dim and lazy Quidditch Captain had gotten the team to the victory they'd had last year -- Slytherin had won several years running, if he remembered right, and it was currently a mystery to Harry how they'd done it.

Still, the early finish gave him enough time to get back to the dormitories and have a shower -- he didn't have a space or a key to the Quidditch lockers yet -- before meeting with Professor Snape. It felt good to be clean, though his legs still ached and his neck was sore from scanning the field.

He emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, and Snake lifted his small, angular head from the bedspread where he'd been napping. Harry hesitated only briefly before hanging Snake over his shoulders, pulling his collar up to hide the dull green body. He felt oddly safe with Snake wrapped around his neck, and he knew it was Snake's favourite place to be.

He tried to brush his defiant hair into some semblance of order, and then gave up and wandered out into the common room, through the portrait-door, and down the maze of hallways to Professor Snape's office, limping a little when the muscles in his left leg cramped.

He was a little early, but he knocked anyway, and pushed the door open when he was bid. He came forward onto the round, dark green carpet that covered the bare stone floor, and allowed himself to look around just a little. Of all the rooms at Hogwarts, this was the room he was the most familiar with; when he was young he'd often spent an afternoon distracting himself with a book while Professor Snape took care of unavoidable paperwork during weekend visits. He took in the walls lined with bookshelves, full of well-used volumes and the occasional odd knickknack -- skulls of various kinds, brass ornaments Harry didn't know the use of, jars containing strangely coloured liquids and powders. Dust danced in the late-afternoon sunbeams that streamed in from the narrow, high windows.

Professor Snape sat at the big, low-topped writing desk, which had seemed much larger when Harry was eight. There was a pile of rolled up parchment scrolls on his left, and a smaller pile of unrolled ones, held down by a green glass paperweight, on his right. He laid down his quill when he saw Harry, and capped the inkwell in which he kept his red marking ink.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Snape," Harry said politely, and only slightly anxiously. The older man pushed his marking to one side.

"You're early."

"Yes, sir. Captain Flint let me out from practice early," Harry answered.

"Oh?" An eyebrow arched a little. "Are you performing to his standard?"

"I think so, sir. He seemed to be bored with drilling me with golf balls," Harry said hesitantly.

"Good. Without a strong Seeker this year, Slytherin has very little chance of retaining the Quidditch Cup, and Bole would not have been adequate. Please be seated," Snape said, waving his hand at the chair on the other side of the desk, which slid a few inches. Harry sat, wary in case it decided to move again.

Snape steepled his fingers, and Harry wondered if he'd done something wrong.

"As loath as I am to admit it," the professor finally said, "Your guardians seem to have done a decent job of raising you with the proper intellectual quality suitable to a Hogwarts student. I had very grave doubts about a Muggle education, but I assume it has been supplemented by Black and Lupin."

"Supplemented, sir?" Harry asked, curiously.

"You've had some magical history?" Snape inquired. "Professor Flitwick informs me that your Charmwork is enhanced by a pre-existent basic knowledge of Latin, as well."

"Oh -- yes," Harry agreed. "Remus worked on Latin with me this summer, and Sirius had me on beginning Arithmancy last year."

"Indeed? And how do you enjoy it?"

"It's a lot harder than long-division," Harry admitted. "But it's loads more interesting."

Snape nodded, and there was the peculiar twitch of his lips again; Harry decided something had amused him, and the twitch was as close as he would ever get to laughter from the grave professor. "And your reading?"

"My reading, sir?" Harry asked. Snape nodded. "I er...do a lot of it?" he ventured, unsure what Snape's question had meant.

"I believe I left some volumes with you, the last time we saw each other..." Snape said, and Harry realised that was what this conversation had been working around to.

"Yes, sir. The Mabinogion, sir, and a children's book," Harry answered. "I was very grateful to have them. Especially the Mabinogion. Seeing as we were in Wales and all."

Professor Snape gave him a rare, fleeting smile.

"And which story did you enjoy the most?"

Harry considered this. "The story of Peredur, I think."

"Peredur?" Snape looked actually surprised.

"Yeah -- well, I didn't really like Peredur. He was a bit of a wet blanket and all, but you can't really blame him, can you? I mean, his mum was nuts and she raised him in the middle of a forest, which can't be good for a person. And he did beat up a bunch of knights, even though he was kind of a dumb farmboy. But I liked Gwalchmai," Harry said. "He was clever and polite and never had to beat anyone up. Is...is that wrong? Not a good story to like? "

"No -- not wrong, precisely," Snape said thoughtfully. They sat in silence for a while, until Harry had gathered his courage and wits about him.

"May I ask a question, Professor?" he asked. Snape gestured for him to continue. "Today at practice...I don't mean to complain, but Bole cheated. And Captain Flint said I should cheat, too."

Snape leaned forward. "And you are reluctant to be dishonest, Harry?"

"No," Harry said, "but what's the point? I know Slytherins play to win," he said hurriedly, "And I'm sure it's a very nice cup, but where's the fun? Gryffindors don't cheat, do they?"

Snape sneered, slightly. "Certainly they do not."

"So where's the fun? Winning only lasts about two minutes. Playing lasts hours if you do it right."

"And you play for the game."

"Why else should I play?"

Snape leaned back, one hand touching his desk, one on the arm of his chair. He was silent, but Harry waited patiently; he remembered Snape's silences.

"In life, Harry, playing for the game may mean losing one's life," he said quietly. "As your father discovered, when he pushed too far too fast for the thrill of it."

Harry sucked in a breath, sharply.

"There are no rules to life," Snape continued. "There are no rules to war, if you want to survive it."

His right hand drifted across his ribcage, touching his left forearm.

"But Quidditch isn't war," Harry said. "It's just Quidditch. And it seems to me..." he hesitated, unsure how free he could be with the suddenly distant professor.

"Yes?"

"It seems to me, Professor, that learning to use what I have against the other team, on even ground, is better than learning to get around the rules that don't exist, not really," Harry said. "I mean, you can't break the rules if there aren't any, and if there aren't any rules, all you've got is your wits. At least that's what I think," he finished, well aware that Marcus Flint, who was a fifth year, probably knew better than him.

Snape turned to regard him with sharp eyes, a look similar to that he'd had the first time Harry had spoken to a snake in front of him. He felt Snake's soothing weight, and met Snape's eyes squarely.

"If you wish to depend on wits instead of lawlessness, Harry, I will not stand in your way. Neither will I stand between you and your team-mates, however," Snape said. "Your guardians possessed very little respect for the rules of this school, but it is true that your father was a truly Gryffindor sportsman."

"You didn't like my dad much, did you?" Harry asked, daringly.

"I believe, Mr. Potter, that you have used up your quotient of impertinent questions for the week," Snape replied. "And mine have been answered satisfactorily. You may go."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, properly chastised. He was at the door before Snape's voice stopped him.

"Harry..."

"Yes, Professor Snape?" he asked, turning.

"It is a commendable thing, in one so young, to understand the difference between cheating and guile," Snape said. "We'll speak again soon."

"Yes sir," Harry replied, and let himself out into the cool, dim hallway.

I like him, Snake said, hooking himself over Harry's ear once they were on their way towards the stairs that led to the Great Hall. He tastes like snakes.

I like him too, Harry answered, grinning to himself.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 10

Dear Harry,

I apologise for being so late in writing to you, but Sirius wouldn't give me quill and ink any sooner. I'm afraid it wasn't easy this time around, but not to worry: I'm not hurt, just tired and sore. Your letter arrived on the 22nd and I saved it specifically so I'd have something to read in bed on the 24th; thank you for writing such a long letter to keep me entertained, it was very thoughtful of you as usual. Sirius and I both enjoy reading about your Quidditch practices and I think Sirius is almost ready to admit you're playing for Slytherin. He'll come round, Harry. Your story about Padma and the trick Gobstones game had us both laughing until we couldn't breathe; it was very wrong of Draco to charm them to all go off at once, and exactly the sort of thing a certain distant cousin named Sirius might have done when we were at school.

Life has been quiet the last few days. Nymphadora came to dinner last night, which was nice, and she told us she can't wait to see you and Neville at Christmas holiday. Andromeda keeps trying to get her to invite her trainer, Kingsley Shacklebolt, to dinner sometime, but apparently that's 'not professional', according to Dora, who still insists we call her Tonks. I can't imagine what Andromeda was thinking, naming her Nymphadora in the first place.

At any rate, I've spent most of my time in bed, and Sirius has been bringing me books to read, and buying shiny things he thinks will entertain me. I should be up and about again by the time you get this which, if Hedwig is her usual efficient self, should be four days before Hallowe'en. I hope you're looking forward to the feast -- it's quite spectacular. I'll be envying you as Sirius makes me choke down one more cup of beef broth in the hopes that somehow, if I only have enough protein in my system, I'll come to my senses and stop getting ill every four weeks. He's promised to allow me as much pumpkin pie as I like, however. Apparently vegetables are permitted so long as they're mixed with custard.

I'm sorry to hear you're not enjoying your Defence Against the Dark Arts classes; it used to be the most brilliant class in school, but I hear Quirrell's lost his nerve a bit. Go easy on him; he's a new teacher and I'm sure he's nervous about making a good impression. If you want some extra practice over the holiday, I'll do some work with you. I'm glad to hear you're enjoying your other classes, and that Professor Snape is keeping you properly challenged. I hear from Ted that Neville still complains he's a little shirty in class, but then we can't all be as even-tempered and cheerful as Neville, and what a world it would be if we could.

I'll write more later, but Hedwig is eager to stretch her wings and Sirius has returned from his food-foraging, so I'll let you go back to your studies, hopefully, and write again later.

Greetings from all of us here at Grimmauld Place,

Remus

Remus capped the ink-bottle and put his quill away just in time; the ink was barely dry on the address when Sirius landed on the bed, grinning, and nuzzled his neck. Remus, propped on his elbows with the folded letter in front of him, merely smiled and laid it aside before Sirius' exuberance could wrinkle it. Sirius pulled the loose blanket higher up over his back from where it had settled around his hips, and draped one arm across him affectionately.

"I'm not dying, Sirius," Remus said with a smile, as Sirius kissed his ear.

"You will be if you don't keep warm, Moony," Sirius answered.

"It's been a week since the full moon, I'm fine."

"It's been four days, and you're not fine," Sirius replied. "Look, I brought you curry."

Remus smiled as a paper carton was shoved in front of him, and a cheap disposable spoon placed in one hand.

"It's good for you."

"I know it's good for me, Pads," he said, opening the top of the carton and stirring up the thick, fragrant curry a little.

"That's not just off-the-cart curry you know, I went down to a real Indian restaurant and had them box some up."

Remus nuzzled Sirius back, just under the ear, and laughed against his cheek. "I'll eat it, Pads, I promise. What's got into you today?"

"Nothing, just glad you're getting better," Sirius said, unwrapping some naan as well, and breaking off a piece to give to Remus.

"I wasn't that sick," Remus grumbled. Sirius caught his wrist, spoon halfway to his mouth.

"You were that sick," he said gravely. "And I was that worried. I don't know why the last moon was so bad for you, but it was, and it worries me."

Remus gently tugged his wrist free, and ate the spoonful of curry before replying.

"It comes and goes, you know that," he said, glancing away. "I haven't had one that bad in a long time, and doubt I will again anytime soon. And I had Padfoot there -- you did everything right. It was just a hard Change. They happen."

"They never happened in Wales."

"Wales was different."

"We could move back there."

"Sirius, there's absolutely no need for that."

Sirius' arm tightened around his waist, and the dark-haired man rested his chin on Remus' shoulder.

"Eat," he said, kissing his neck. Remus ate quietly, finishing every bite; he'd found his appetite again, and the spicy food helped clear his head a little. When he was finished, Sirius rose and took the empty food boxes into their kitchen, returning as Remus slid down until he was lying fully on the bed, head pillowed on his arms. The springs of the bed creaked slightly as Sirius sat next to him and rested his hand between Remus' shoulderblades.

"You're dreaming again," he said quietly, and Remus closed his eyes. He didn't think he'd had that many, but if Sirius had noticed, he must not be remembering them all. "Dreams like you used to have. Aren't you?"

"Am I waking you up at night?"

"No, but sometimes I wake up to get some water and when I come back, I can see..." Sirius sighed. "You move a bit, and you mutter sometimes. Nothing I can understand, but I can see how tired you look some mornings. Do they wake you up?"

"Once in a while. It's nothing, Sirius."

"It's not nothing." Sirius slid down next to him, and Remus curled into his arms, taking comfort in the warm, broad mass of Sirius' body, the scent of him.

He inhaled deeply. For nine years he'd wanted this, and even after two and a half years of having it, having Sirius -- having everything Sirius wanted to give him, plus a home and a share in raising Harry -- he was still afraid that one day it would simply end. Not because he didn't trust Sirius, or had no faith in him, but because he didn't know why Sirius loved him, or what precisely he'd done to deserve getting everything he wanted.

"What happens in this one?" Sirius asked, after a while. Remus felt his heart beat faster, and deliberately calmed himself.

"I don't know. It's not clear, like the others. I can see Harry looking at me, and I've done something wrong, and I'm packing to go somewhere..."

"Away from us?"

"I can't tell."

"I won't let you," Sirius said petulantly.

Remus sighed into his neck. "It's not the leaving that's the problem. It's that I've done something, let Harry down somehow."

"You never would."

"Not on purpose."

Sirius' fingers worked their way up his neck, into his hair, rubbing his scalp soothingly. "You can tell me these things, you know."

"I didn't think it was that important."

"All right."

Remus felt a kiss on his cheek, and turned his head slightly so that their lips met; Sirius might think he was still ill and delicate, but his body was responding to Sirius' closeness, and he wanted the assurance anyway, that Sirius was really there, was really his. His fingers tightened possessively on Sirius' shoulders.

"Moony -- " Sirius said cautiously, and Remus smiled wickedly.

"Padfoot," he replied, voice low, pressing closer. Sirius' lips opened, deepening the kiss almost involuntarily. "Good boy..."

Sirius laughed against his mouth. "Are you sure you're up to..." he paused, as Remus hooked a leg over his hip, brushing their bodies together tantalisingly. "Oh. You are sure."

"Very sure," Remus murmured. "I think you're sure too."

"Oh, yes..." Sirius caught his breath as Remus nuzzled against his shirt, finding the nylon dog collar and kissing the sensitive skin underneath. They rolled until Remus was on his back, grinning up at him and fumbling with his belt. Sirius put a hand on his, stopping him as he leaned back.

"Let me," Sirius said, and Remus paused. "You're still sick."

"Sirius, I'm -- "

"Let me," Sirius repeated, fingers tracing the line of Remus' knuckles. They hooked around Remus' hand, undoing the belt beneath his palm, while Sirius' other hand untucked his shirt, pulling it up and over his head.

Remus released the now-undone belt, and ran his fingers over Sirius' skin, smooth and a little paler than his own, the contrast between them somehow pleasing. Sirius, even if he never craved work or stimulation the way Remus did, was nevertheless an active man, and though broadly built, he was still lean. He was pale, too, and Remus liked the way Sirius' skin made his own seem like rich gold by contrast.

Sirius, however, was not distracted from his purpose, and he bent over Remus to unbutton the pyjama shirt he wore, palms smoothing over his shoulders and neck as he pushed it off and tugged the sleeves up his arms. Remus obediently lifted his hands over his head, and laughed when Sirius held them there, after removing the offending shirt.

"Pinned you," Sirius said, kissing him gently.

"Wrestling is a lot more fun now than when we were at school," Remus agreed, and bucked his hips. Sirius swore, and let go of his wrists, so that he could brace himself on the bed. Remus smiled up at him and rolled his hips this time, and Sirius moaned.

"What you do to me, Moony," he growled, working his way out of his trousers, "oughtn't be allowed."

"I could stop," Remus offered. Sirius brushed a hand across the front of his thin pyjama pants, and he whined, high in the back of his throat. "Actually, no I couldn't -- "

Sirius swallowed the words with his mouth, and they arched together for a few minutes while Sirius tried to undress him, finally kicking the last of the clothing away.

"Much better," he muttered, as Remus reached up to stroke his face. He'd long ago memorised the curve of his cheekbones and the edge of his jaw, but Sirius seemed to like it when they touched like this, and Remus had fallen in love with him as much for his mind as for this line right here, that ridge of bone under skin, the small scar on the side of his nose where he'd cut himself during a school fight years ago. The perfections and the imperfections and oh, Sirius, the way Sirius knew just how to fit against him.

"Moony, do you want -- " Sirius gasped, as their hips pressed together in an increasingly fast rhythm, hot skin against hot skin, delightfully teasing sensations.

"Just this," Remus answered, eyes closing as he threw his head back against the blankets. Sirius saw his opportunity and buried his face in his neck, kissing and biting, the collar he wore rubbing against Remus' collarbone. He felt Sirius tense and the warm rush of the other man's orgasm on his stomach, but Sirius didn't stop moving, didn't stop thrusting and moaning as Remus saw white behind his eyelids and suddenly couldn't breathe. There -- once more -- such delicious touch -- and Remus felt the world, at least for a little while, fade into the feel of Sirius, sprawled boneless and satisfied on top of him.

When his breathing evened out again he felt Sirius move, rolling a little to one side so that Sirius wasn't crushing him and he wasn't a rather bony body pillow. Sirius kept him close, however, and spoke almost against his skin.

"You seem to be feeling better," he admitted. Remus laughed.

"I am, Padfoot."

"I'm glad."

"Me too."

"I stopped by Schaeffer's today," Sirius said, as Remus murmured a cleaning spell and curled closer. "They say you're welcome to pick up a shift tomorrow, if you want it."

Remus stroked the short black hair, rubbing his fingers across one of Sirius' ears. "You just like me working there because they let you wander around in the back room and play with the experimental products."

"And flirt with Madam Schaeffer, don't forget."

Remus yawned. "How could I. You're a cad to lead her on."

"Who says I'm leading her on? I'm a healthy, unwed man with a son who needs a mother," Sirius said, mockingly. "Who better than the proprietress of a store full of educational toys?"

"Well, in that case I suppose I ought to move out and make room for the Missus," Remus answered. Sirius laughed and closed his eyes sleepily.

"Smartarse," he muttered.

"A nap at three in the afternoon," Remus said, as Sirius' breathing slowed, and his muscles relaxed. "Such decadence."

"Naps're good for you," Sirius mumbled. Remus dropped a kiss into his hair, and closed his own eyes, settling comfortably into the tangle of blankets and pillows and Sirius. After a few minutes, Hedwig soared through the open window, landed indignantly on the bed, and pecked until a hand reached out from the confused pile and flung a letter her way. She clicked her beak, picked up the letter with one foot, and hopped to the edge of the bed, swooping back out again.

On the bed, the two men slept on, oblivious to the world.

Remus' letter arrived the following morning, at their usual early breakfast, and Draco fed Hedwig his toast crusts -- or tried to, while she stole his bacon -- as Harry read it aloud. The Great Hall was echoingly empty in the early morning, but the four of them found they liked it that way. It had become a regular occurrence for Padma, on her way down from the Ravenclaw eyrie in the west tower, to stop at Gryffindor tower and use a knocking charm Harry had installed to wake Neville. He usually tumbled out of bed and was, due to his previous tendency to oversleep, fit to be seen in five minutes or less. Harry met Draco at the Great Hall entrance, and they waited there, leaning against the wall and facing the staircase, for Padma and Neville to arrive.

Once in a while they were there even before the food had been laid out, and then the house-elves would usually pop up to bring them breakfast; Draco once asked if it wasn't a trouble for them, but Denbigh reassured him that they were already awake to start the fires in the common-room heating stoves, now that it was coming on winter, and he himself never left the kitchens at any rate. It wasn't unusual for Headmaster Dumbledore, who was apparently also an early riser, to arrive just as they were finishing their meal, sometimes accompanied by Professor Snape. More and more often they found that five or ten minutes after Denbigh brought their food, Professor Quirrell would appear and eat a solitary bowl of oatmeal before hurrying away again.

"Wonder where he's going off to," Neville said on Hallowe'en morning as Quirrell nearly ran into Snape -- one going, the other arriving. Harry, who saw the oddly disdainful sneer on Snape's face when Quirrell passed, thought perhaps he was unpopular amongst the other professors. He certainly spent a lot of time alone, and once or twice he'd been spotted on the edges of the Forbidden Forest; then again he was a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all, and if the Forest wasn't full of it, Harry didn't know what was.

"Getting ready for classes, probably," Draco said, rather generously Harry thought, as they were still a good hour away from the first class of the day. Draco finished his toast, and continued. "So what I want to know is if you three are up for a little entertainment after the Hallowe'en feast."

"Not this seance nonsense again," Padma sighed.

"Listen, if you want to chat with a ghost -- " Neville started.

"Oh, let him alone, it's all just for fun," Harry said, waving off their protests. "Isn't it, Malfoy?"

"Sure," Draco said, but he looked a bit cowed by Padma's skepticism.

"Go on then, tell us about it," Neville said, stirring his cereal.

"Well, I just thought it'd be sort of spooky, because it's Hallowe'en and all," Draco said, turning scarlet. "I thought we could sneak out after the Feast and find an empty classroom and do a sleep-over sort of a thing."

"I'm not allowed sleep-overs with boys," Padma said haughtily.

"We're not boys, we're us," Harry answered. Padma gave him a narrow look. "Go on, Draco."

"It was just a thought," Draco mumbled. "I've never had a proper sleep-over. Just...steal some blankets and camp out in an empty classroom and maybe do some charms. I got hold of our Prefect's Divination book and it's full of that kind of thing. It's not ghosts," he added, to Neville. "It's for seeing the future and all."

"You're sure to get caught," Padma threatened.

"You needn't worry then, need you?" Neville asked, automatically approving the plan if it meant Padma was against it. Neville would defy school rules on principle, given the proper opportunity. "As you won't be along."

"I didn't say that!" Padma protested.

"The fifth floor's got an empty storage room I bet we could hide in," Harry said, thoughtfully.

"How do you know that?" Neville and Padma demanded in unison. They tended to view anything above fourth floor as Gryffindor and Ravenclaw property, since there weren't any classrooms above the fourth floor except Divination and Astronomy.

Harry shrugged. "Whenever I get lost I start trying doors," he said. "It's a funny little room with some stairs in it down to another empty room below -- doesn't look like it's been used in years. Neville can lock the door -- "

"Neville's rubbish at locking charms," Padma flared. Harry grinned. Neville wasn't actually that bad at them, but Padma prided herself on her locks.

"All right then, we'll let you do it," he said graciously. Padma looked at once vindicated and suspicious.

"Harry can bring food, and I'll bring candles and the book, and Padma and Neville, you bring cushions," Draco said, triumphantly. "There's the Prefect, we'd better go," he added, gathering up his books and plate. Neville did likewise, departing for Gryffindor, but Padma lingered a moment.

"Are you sure this is wise, Harry?" she asked quietly.

"I think," Harry said, giving her his best Cheeky Sirius smile, "That not-being-wise is half the fun."

"It's just that it's Draco's idea, and well..." she looked indecisive. "He's Draco, you know..."

"Patil, how often do I have to tell you about loitering around the Slytherin table?" Percy Weasley demanded, as he passed on his way to Gryffindor. Padma let out a frightened "eep!" and ran to Ravenclaw, forgetting her plate, which Goyle brushed aside as he sat down.

"Morning Potter," he grunted, and Harry resigned himself to another forty minutes of scintillating breakfast conversation about how brilliant the sausages were and could he please pass the water pitcher.

If he was to be perfectly honest, Severus Snape rather enjoyed Hallowe'en. He felt it was the one holiday in the year that really suited him.

Christmas was trite, New Year's gaudy, and Valentine's downright revolting. Easter was redeemed from total uselessness only by coming attached to a week-long break from school. There was an interesting Muggle holiday called Guy Fawkes Day, something to do with blowing up the Muggle Government, which Severus was frankly in favour of; he thought it must also be pleasantly cathartic to build a giant bonfire and throw an effigy on it. Still, he always managed to miss that one somehow, and was left squarely with Hallowe'en.

A good old-fashioned celebration of death, now that was something a person could really sink his teeth into.

He was less irritable with the idiot students that particular day, and more inclined to praise the marginally intelligent ones. He refused on principle to consider any student of his brilliant, since then the ones who actually were brilliant had no excuse to slack off. He did occasionally stroke the egos of idiots who nevertheless had powerful families, because he was not himself an idiot; if the child in question was at least going to grasp the basics, they might as well feel they'd grasped much more, and go home to give glowing reports of the Potions Master to their parents.

Hogwarts made Hallowe'en safe, after all, charged it with floating pumpkins and the promise of an evening feast. Safe for a former Death Eater -- long since redeemed but still stained, he was safe at Hogwarts.

He would not think on that today, however, especially not as he was already ensconced at the high table, between Quirrell's empty chair and Flitwick's high-seated one. He even tolerated Dumbledore's fearsomely annoying wink, and was pleased to see Harry -- yes, and Draco, though at separate tables -- enjoying the feast.

And he did, of course, turn a blind eye to Harry's exploding certain floating illuminated pumpkins, using a fork transfigured into a catapult and the boiled sweets in the dishes on the table. The third one had just gone off, right over Percy Weasley, when the door slammed and there were frantic footsteps running down the aisle.

Quirrell, pale as a ghost, skidded to a stop, slamming into the high table about two feet to Severus' right.

"TROLL!" he cried, "IN THE DUNGEONS!"

There was a moment of silence, and Quirrell seemed to collect himself.

"Thought you ought to know," he said, and passed out.

The Great Hall seemed to fill with noise, suddenly, and Severus found himself rising just as Dumbledore threw purple firecrackers from the end of his wand, silencing everyone.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Feet began to shuffle as the prefects called out to one another, trying to herd hundreds of frightened and quite possibly thrilled children back to the dormitories.

"I'm certain it was Peeves," McGonagall said off to his left somewhere, and Severus was inclined to agree with her, except that he never agreed with Gryffindors. "Either he's frightened poor Quirrell to death or he's let one of those troublesome creatures into the castle and we shall no doubt have a time getting rid of it," she continued, as she led the teachers towards the hallway outside, and the stairwell down to the dungeons.

It was her speech which gave Severus pause, in fact, because if he himself was thinking it was Peeves then he clearly wasn't thinking hard enough. Peeves could never have wrangled a troll into the school, and if he was posing, well, Quirrell was a prat but he was certainly able to tell the difference between a poltergeist and a mountain troll.

Come to think of it...

Where was Quirrell?

He wasn't lying below the table where he'd fainted, but Severus was sure he hadn't seen him in the crowd of professors trailing McGonagall and Dumbledore.

Severus Snape had a sudden awful premonition, coupled with the regret he hadn't thought of the idea first, quickly quashed because he knew he could never have gone through with it, if only because it meant betraying Albus Dumbledore. Hard on the heels of that thought, even as he ran quickly in the opposite direction from the other professors, was a mild twinge of grudgingly respectful admiration for Quirrell.

He rounded the staircase that would have led him to the third floor and kept going, certain he heard footsteps on the stairs. Fortunately there was a faster way that a newcomer to the castle mightn't know about, especially since Quirrell hadn't been a Slytherin when he'd been at Hogwarts as a student....

He arrived in front of an apparently nondescript panel in the wall, only separated from its fellows by a small set of stairs, house-elf sized, leading up to it. He rapped smartly on the panel, twice, and a head emerged through it.

"Why if it isn't Severus," the ghost said, giving him a grin and doffing an extremely old-fashioned hat. "And what can I do for you this evening, fellow-me-lad? Leaving the Hallowe'en party already?"

"Mr. Howson, I have never been more satisfied to see you staunchly at your post," Severus said quickly, pushing the panel open and climbing into the small chamber on the other side. It had been a perfect fit when he was fourteen, but at thirty-one it was slightly snug, and he had to sit against the back of it, drawing his knees up under his chin. "Third floor, if you please."

"Third floor it is," the porter's ghost said, and reached through a wall. He stuck his tongue out in concentration -- it was hard for ghosts to become solid enough to move things, most of the time -- and Severus heard a slight click.

Then his stomach dropped out as the mechanism creaked to life and shot him up three floors in a matter of seconds, the goblin-forged machinery working along much the same lines as the vault-wagons at Gringotts. His head hit the ceiling when it screeched to a halt, and he thrust the door open, stumbling out into the third-floor corridor. With two or three seconds to get his bearings, he was off again, not quite sure if he could still beat Quirrell to the door.

He reached the entrance to the forbidden hallway and opened the lock without stopping to move, thrusting the door open and holding his wand out before him in case Fluffy -- god, what an idiot name for a three-headed-dog -- was feeling especially fierce.

Empty. No sign of Quirrell. No sign of Fluffy, for that matter, though the beast could conceivably be hiding in the shadows.

He heard footsteps behind him, and turned just in time to meet Quirrell at the door, wand at the ready.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly. "I see you've recovered from your fainting spell, Professor."

"P-p-p-p -- "

"Yes, indeed," Severus agreed.

"J-j-j-j-just -- "

"Coming to make sure the troll hadn't magically ascended from the dungeon to the third floor? Peculiar that you'd choose to come here, halfway across the castle. Even a very bright troll has trouble finding his arse with both hands," Severus said, rejoicing in the opportunity to use his truly nastiest sneer. "I doubt very much he could find -- "

There was a snarl, and then a snap, and then fire raced up Severus' right leg. Quirrell fled as Severus shouted in surprise and turned to smack Fluffy across one of its snouts with his wand, keeping two heads at bay while the third tried to shake his leg where it had its teeth sunk firmly in his right calf.

"Quirrell, come back here -- bloody hellhound -- fucking Merlin up the arse," he swore, as he flailed at the three-headed dog. Finally he managed to keep the free heads away long enough to point his wand at the one attached to his leg, and gave it a nasty shock that sent it whining into the corner. He could feel blood trickling down his leg, and limped through the doorway, slamming and locking it. On the other side, he leaned against the wall and tried to examine the damage, but it's very difficult to study the back of one's own leg, and finally he gave in and limped off to the hospital wing to fetch some bandages. The trousers were ruined, and from the looks of it his boot had been punctured as well. Every step sent little

sharp spikes of pain up his leg.

Quirrell, he decided, was going to pay dearly for this.

The hospital wing was empty and silent, and he helped himself to the bandages, and a bottle of healing salve he himself had brewed for Madam Pomfrey. There was a floo point in her office, and he let himself in, unwilling to walk all the way back to the dungeons when he could floo just as easily. Hopefully the troll had been coralled by now -- if indeed a troll there was, he thought, considering Quirrell's apparent plans to raid the third-floor corridor. He had half a mind to take it up with Dumbledore, but his pride had been injured, and he could handle this personally.

Quirrell was a stammering fool that couldn't out-think a barn owl. A greedy little pip who wanted to live forever, eh? They'd just see about that...

He found a knife in his desk drawer and carefully lifted his leg so that the heel of his boot hooked under the ledge of his desk, grimacing as this sent fresh blood oozing out of the wounds. Deep and vicious, but relatively clean; it could have been much worse. He began to slice the fabric away, exploring more with his fingers, though it hurt to do so.

He cleaned the leg with alcohol and a good solid scrubbing spell before salving it and bending to the difficult task of wrapping the bandage. He had just managed to get it started when he heard a soft gasp from the doorway, and glanced up.

Harry stood there, staring at him in surprise, looking guilty.

"Come in then," he said gruffly, continuing to wind the bandage. "Five points for being out while confined to House dormitories. Bring yourself over here and be useful."

"Professor Binns said he couldn't find you," Harry blurted. "But I heard noises in your office..."

"Professor Binns is an incompetent fool, and dead to boot," Severus replied. "He'd do better to go looking for that troll -- if there even is one."

"They found it," Harry said warily, standing on the other side of the desk.

"Did they now? You're not doing any good over there, come and help me with this," Severus said, and Harry circled the desk, taking the bandage out of his hands and deftly wrapping it around the injured muscle.

"Professor Binns came down to say they caught it in the girls' bathroom. He said Hermione Granger went looking for it and when she found it, it tried to eat her, but Ron and Neville and the other Gryffindor boys showed up and beat it unconscious," Harry said, in a very satisfied voice. He tucked the bandage through a loose loop and tied it at the top, then wrapped another layer back down towards the shredded ends of the boot. "Wish I'd been there."

"No you don't," Severus answered. "You're not completely incompetent at that," he added, as Harry finished.

"Once in a while after a full moon Remus is tired, but Sirius gets caught on brambles and I have to -- " Harry bit his lip, suddenly. He tied the end of the bandage off just above the ankle, and Severus pulled the torn edge of his trouser leg down as far as it would go.

"How'd you get hurt?" Harry asked, finally.

"None of your concern, Mr. Potter," Severus answered swiftly. "Ten points to Slytherin for having more common sense than all the Gryffindor first-years combined. Off with you to the common room."

Harry gave him a proud, quick smile, and scuttled away. Severus slipped his foot off the desk and considered whether he ought to change first, or find Dumbledore and get news of this troll. He tested the steadiness of the leg; the salve he'd used had a numbing element, and he thought it wasn't serious enough to warrant keeping the foot up. He could probably get as far as the Great Hall and back --

For the second time that day a sharp shock caught him off guard, and he clapped his hands to his head as searing pain welled up in his right temple. He hunched over, his own ragged breathing far too loud in his ears, pressing the heel of his right hand to the source of the agonising pain. His left arm began to throb as well.

As soon as it had come, it passed, and he shook his head to clear it, clenching his left fist. He ripped the sleeve up, staring at the faint shadow that never went away, his faded Dark Mark.

Phantom pain, he told himself. Displacement of the pain in his leg, that was all, or some side-effect of the salve. He'd have to brew a new supply; clearly this bottle was going bad.

He ought to put on new trousers, and make sure Quirrell was accounted for, and then as soon as he could gather his wits about him, he and the new Defence professor were going to have a nice long chat about school loyalty.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 11

"You should have seen it!"

Harry grinned, rolled his eyes, and propped his chin on his hand as one more first-year accosted Neville in the library.

Neville was the hero of the moment, along with the other Gryffindor boys. He and Harry and Padma had hoped escaping to their usual study-table in the library might calm things down. Instead, it seemed like every student in their year -- excepting perhaps the Slytherins, who were mostly muttering mutinously about show-off Gryffindors -- had come up to ask Neville to tell the story.

Hard on the heels of this particular Ravenclaw was Draco, who tossed his book-bag on the table and threw himself into the chair, hastily.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he said, unpacking his parchment and quill and sparing barely a glance for the girl who was standing next to Neville's chair. "I've had to stop at Professor McGonagall's office to give back a book she said I should read because I, you know, I keep flattening things instead of transfiguring them -- I've no clue why she thinks I'm going to stop flattening things if I do harder stuff -- Neville!" he said, and his face broke into a wide grin. "How many times've you had to tell the story today?"

"Eight or nine," Neville said, with a grin and a nod at his audience. Draco made an 'oh' shape with his mouth. "Have you heard it yet?"

"Just the rumours -- too bad we couldn't talk at breakfast this morning -- and about the thing last night," Draco wagged his eyebrows in what he probably thought was a subtle manner. Padma snickered. "Stupid troll, ruining our fun. Go on then, tell us."

"Do be quiet about it this time, Neville, I'm trying to read," Padma warned. Harry, who thought that even hearing a story he'd already heard twice was more interesting than his History of Magic reading, leaned back in his chair and listened. Neville was not a born storyteller by any stretch of the imagination, but he got along well enough; he paused in all the right places for dramatic effect as he narrated how the Gryffindor boys had realised Hermione Granger was missing, and Parvati had said Hermione was just the sort to go looking for troll-sized trouble. So the boys had gone to see if they could find her, and Ron Weasley ended up locking the troll in the bathroom -- the girls' bathroom. In which Hermione had tried to hide after realising that the troll was, in fact, planning on making her a light snack.

After they figured this out, Seamus unlocked it again and they all charged in, Neville explained, and they all tried to hex the troll at once, which even Ron, who was a gifted storyteller and something of an exaggerator at that (as all good storytellers were), had not been able to deny had fairly absurd results. Neville managed to freeze one of the troll's feet to the ground so that it had to flail around a bit, while Dean accidentally levitated its club and Ron and Seamus sent a porcelain sink flying into its gut. Dean, distracted by the crash, let the club drop on its head, and it fell over as much as it could with one foot still stuck to the floor and Hermione screaming the walls down in the background.

"Brilliant," Draco murmured, as the Ravenclaw girl, satisfied with Neville's story, bounced away to tell her friends. Harry grinned and smacked Neville on the shoulder, resulting in a brief arm-wrestle that Harry won easily. "If I were fighting a mountain troll," Draco continued, "I'd definitely use the sinks thing, only I'd do it on purpose."

"And get water everywhere?" Harry asked. "I'd blind it with a good eye-sticking spell and get on its shoulders and thwack it in the head till it gave in."

"Yeah, or at least stick down both feet," Draco added.

"I'd freeze it up with a petrificus totalus before it even got to the bathroom at all," Padma said, without looking up from her book. The boys all turned to regard her, and she turned a page delicately. "As opposed to locking it in the bathroom with a student, wrecking the bathroom in the course of rescuing the student you locked in there in the first place --"

"Listen, we didn't tell her to go looking for it, you know, she did that all on her own," Neville replied. Padma, still reading, arched an eyebrow.

"She's got a point, there," Draco said thoughtfully. "I mean, it'd be tough to petrify a ten-foot troll, but I bet the four of you could have done it together," he added, to Neville. "Each take a limb, or something."

"Yeah, well, you weren't staring it in the knees at the time," Neville scowled. "Or smelling it."

"Right, right, fine," Harry said quickly, as Padma looked up from her book and opened her mouth to say something. "The point is it's gone now and good show Neville for helping, and I'm sure if we'd been there we would have done the same."

"Ruined Hallowe'en, though," Draco said, after a few moments of silent study, broken only by Neville's sullen muttering about know-all girls and the troubles they caused. "Our plans, I mean," he added, leaning in closer, conspiratorially. "It won't be the same, but if you still want to give it a try, I've still got the book. We could do it tonight, it's not a school night."

"Are you still on about that Divination nonsense?" Neville asked. "I'm tempted to do it just to get you to shut up about it."

"Well, if it doesn't work we won't do it again, and if it does it'll be fun," Draco said reasonably, though he blushed slightly. Even Padma could not deny this logic. "And you know I'll just keep pestering you about it until I get my way."

"Badgering," Harry murmured, and everyone snickered. "All right then, Malfoy, tonight we'll do it. Same place as before; we'll meet after lights out, and if everyone hasn't shown by midnight we'll do it with those who do. And you keep quiet about it, Neville, I don't want a dozen Gryffindors tagging along."

"I wouldn't tell," Neville said, looking indignant. "It's not like I want people to know I'm going off on some harebrained Hufflepuff plan."

"I am trying," Padma said, patience wearing thin, "to study."

Oliver Wood glanced over at them from another table and shushed her, while the boys tried not to laugh hysterically.

Where are we going? Snake asked that evening, as Harry crammed a blanket and a pyjama shirt into his bookbag in anticipation of spending the night in an unused room on the fifth floor of Hogwarts. Harry glanced around to make sure none of the others were within earshot before replying.

Meeting Draco and Padma and Neville, he said.

It's time to sleep.

Not tonight, Harry answered. You can stay here if you like.

I can sleep in your pocket, Snake answered. Harry grinned and picked him up, checking his breast pocket to make sure nothing was in it before depositing the coiled body in it.

Draco had decreed that Harry should fetch the food, which made sense, since Harry was the only one who knew how to get into the kitchens. This was a fun secret, on the one hand; on the other, Draco was closer -- the hallway to the Hufflepuff dormitories led off to the kitchens first -- and it was going to be tedious if he was the one always having to get the snack supplies.

He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs and then slunk around the hallway to the Hufflepuff portrait, keeping just behind a statue of some rather portly Wizard with what appeared to be a jar of preserves in one hand. It wasn't long before Draco's head appeared, a yellow gleam in the dim light as he emerged carrying his bookbag and an enormous book under one arm.

"Psst, Malfoy!" Harry hissed, and Draco looked startled.

"Who's there?"

"Who do you think, get over here!" Harry said, exasperated. Draco hurried over to the statue, eyeing it as if it was possibly the one summoning him before catching sight of Harry.

"I thought we were meeting in the upstairs room!" Draco said.

"We are -- were -- listen, I want you to come to the kitchens with me so you know how to get in," Harry said. Draco nodded agreement and followed him, watching carefully as he tickled the painted pear and pulled the door open.

"Cool," Draco breathed, when they stepped inside. Harry, grinning, barely heard him over the cacophony of a thousand plates and dishes and bowls being washed.

The House-elves, when they saw their visitors, fell over themselves to be helpful; they fawned on 'Master Draco' until Denbigh had to order them back to washing after they'd filled both boys' arms with treats. They ended up stuffing most of the food into their packs and the rest into their pockets before carefully and somewhat heavily making their way to the staircases.

This was the tricky bit about sneaking around Hogwarts. The smaller stairwells were less likely to be patrolled, but were the favourite hangout of Peeves; the larger main stairs were highly visible. The caretaker Filch and his odious cat Mrs. Norris were often prowling up and down them after-hours, as well. Neville said he'd been poking around for back-staircases that Peeves might not know about, but Padma had mentioned to Harry that she didn't think Neville really had the deviousness of mind to properly look for secret passages.

Padma and Neville -- who only had to go down a few flights, rather than through the main hallway and up -- were waiting for them in the fifth-floor corridor Harry had mentioned, lurking in the shadows. Harry was sure it wasn't Neville's fault that he was such a complete Gryffindor, but he couldn't even lurk properly; his shoes shone and caught Draco's eye immediately.

"We brought cushions," Neville said apologetically, pointing to a pile of squashy cushions nearby, some scarlet, some blue with silver edges. "What smells like sausages?"

"Sausages, I think," Draco said. "The house-elves gave us a lot of food."

Harry, meanwhile, had wandered a few doors down, and was trying doorknobs in an attempt to remember which was unlocked.

"It's this one," he said, over his shoulder to the others, and Padma and Neville gathered up the cushions while Draco clutched his book protectively.

Harry waved them into the little room, and they all stood inside for a moment after the door shut, looking at each other nervously.

"So," Neville said finally, "Let's see this Divinations spell then. It's a real ritual and all, isn't it? We're not supposed to do actual rituals until sixth year."

"Sort of," Draco said, while Padma tossed the cushions down and charmed up a little fire nearby, in a ceramic plate. Harry, for lack of something better to do, began arranging the cushions and lighting the candles in brackets around the walls. "It's a potion, actually -- oh, don't groan, I won't make you brew it -- and you spread it on paper and it's supposed to tell you what your fortune will be."

"That sounds like fun," Harry said, flopping down on a Ravenclaw cushion.

"It's not too bad," Padma allowed. "Only I didn't know we needed a cauldron."

"I brought one," Draco said, upending a cascade of food from his book bag as he dug around in it. "Here's the book and here's a cauldron and I have all the ingredients -- well, nearly. Did Brecon give you any apples?"

"Yup," Harry said, holding up a small bag. "Four of them."

"We only need one," Draco said, opening the book on his lap. "We have to stew it for a bit and then add some other stuff...."

"Professor Snape'd have your tongue for saying that," Neville said.

"He'd have your tongue, for sure," Padma teased Neville.

"There's good uses for human tongues in potions," Harry added, and Draco laughed.

"All right. We stew in boiling water for nine minutes precisely and then we add a well-mixed combination of specific ingredients which I have pre-prepared because I am a diligent student and a credit to Wizardkind," Draco said. "Everyone participating contributes three hairs, and then we boil it for another nine minutes, without stirring. After that we use a brush made of," he dug in his bag, "bound straw, and we brush it on the parchment and it tells us our future. Precise enough?" he asked, as he added water from a bottle to the cauldron, which he delicately floated it over the fire with a careful leviosa.

"Sausages!" Neville said, unwrapping a paper packet. He speared one on his wand and held it over the fire. Padma wrinkled her nose and accepted half of a sliced pear from Draco, while Harry helped himself to a handful of sweets.

Draco minded the potion, mostly, while Padma borrowed his book and read it to make sure he was doing it right, and Neville teased Harry about fancying Neville's sister, which led to some rough-housing when Harry protested and Neville asked wasn't Dora Tonks good enough for Harry? And Harry answered that it was her brother that he wasn't sure about....

"You'll knock it over! Stop it right now," Draco said, in such an unnaturally commanding voice that both boys stopped their wrestling immediately to stare at him. He flushed bright red, and bent back over the cauldron, muttering to himself.

"It looks almost ready," Padma said, leaning over his shoulder. "Shall we add the hair?"

Harry plucked a handful of Neville's, and then his own before Neville could retaliate; Draco carefully pulled out his, and Padma broke stray split-ends off of her usual braid.

"Ready?" Draco said. "All at once. And...drop."

The mixture went from a sort of watery soup to a thick, goopy black ooze. Harry peered at it interestedly.

"It's supposed to do that," Draco and Padma chorused.

They passed the next nine minutes fidgeting a little, handing around parchment and 'helping' Draco trim the brush he'd fashioned so that the straws were all even. The potion, meanwhile, began to thin out again, until it looked like very shiny black ink, of the expensive sort some of the older Slytherin boys used. By the time Draco finally pronounced it ready, and Padma doused the flame, Harry had smoothed his parchment so many times it was beginning to get tattered around the edges.

"You first, Padma," Draco said generously, handing her the straw brush. Padma picked it up hesitantly, glanced at the book, and dipped the brush into the cauldron, sweeping it across the parchment in broad strokes. The paper seemed to absorb the ink, and she passed the brush to Harry.

"It doesn't work," Harry said, pointing to her parchment.

"You have to be in the dark," Padma answered. "Go on, everyone do theirs and then we'll put the candles out."

Harry brushed the black concoction on his parchment, then passed the brush to Draco, who did likewise before letting Neville have a try on his paper.

"Ready?" Padma said. The boys nodded. "Nox Omnis!"

The room was plunged into darkness, except for a faint light reflected off each student's face -- light from the parchments, which were glowing strangely.

"It's got words on it!" Neville said. "I didn't write words!"

"That's the fortune!" Draco answered. "What's it say?"

"I'm not sure..." Neville frowned. "It's in really old handwriting -- look."

He held out the paper, and they saw the even but not-very-legible handwriting.

"To Make Brede Blakke..." Padma read, with some difficulty. "And then down here there's another underlined bit, Fore thee makyingie of Brede Brawne..."

"It's recipes," Neville said suddenly. "I told you it was rubbish, Draco, it's bread recipes, for Merlin's sake!"

"Black bread and brown," Padma mumbled. "Some gave them black bread and some gave them brown...it's an old poem," she added defensively, when the boys stared at her. "Listen, you don't have to believe me."

"No, I've heard that one," Harry said. "It's from a book Sirius likes. The lion and the unicorn were fighting in the town -- something like that. And the lion wins."

"Well, Gryffindor's got a lion for a mascot, hasn't it?" Draco said. "Maybe Neville's going to have to fight a unicorn or something."

"Daft," Neville muttered. "If this is so great and prophetic then, what's yours say?"

"Mine hasn't got any words," Draco answered, offering it to the group for consideration. A sinuous shape covered the page, like some kind of primitive drawing, a curving line with four legs coming out of it, ending in vicious claws.

"Looks a bit dragon-like," Harry said, cocking his head.

"I think it looks like a cat, look, it's got whiskers," Padma said.

"Wouldn't mind having a cat," Draco mused.

"Maybe it's some kind of weird dog," Harry pointed to the 'face' of the creature, which had half-folded ears.

"Are they all going to be about animals?" Neville complained. "Padma, show yours."

Padma giggled a little, and held hers up.

"Books," Draco said, staring at the drawing. "How new and different for you."

"Maybe I'm going to be a librarian," she said. "I rather like mine, I think I'll hang it on my wall as a night-light. Anyhow, I'd rather have books than some drawing of a dog that looks more like a rodent. What's yours, Harry, words or pictures?"

"Um," Harry said, looking down at his own parchment, which he'd ignored until now. "I'm not sure."

He spread it flat on the ground, smoothing it. Snaking across the page, sometimes curving and winding in on itself, was a string of letters that were almost recognisable, but not quite; the shapes were slightly different, or in some cases altogether alien.

"That's Greek, that is," Draco said. "My father's library has books in Greek."

"That's pi," Harry said, pointing to one letter. "We learned about it in maths at the Muggle school I went to."

"It's that staff thing," Padma observed. "My cousin's a doctor, she has that symbol everywhere."

"How're you supposed to unravel your fortune if it's in Greek?" Neville demanded. "That's not fair."

Harry shrugged. "It makes a nice design, anyhow. I can ask Remus what it means, he'll know someone who can read it."

"Well, that was a waste of a good apple," Neville said. "Two recipes for bread, some kind of weird...cat...dog...thing, a load of books and some Greek. I don't --"

He was cut off by a sharp cry from Draco, who scrabbled backwards into the dark shadows when a glowing head appeared above the cauldron. Padma and Harry both yelped too -- the spectral image glowed eerily in the darkness, and it was horribly misshapen --

Neville had fallen over laughing.

"Nick!" he cried, catching his breath. "It's Nick! Draco, come back!"

The image seemed to shimmer and solidify a little, and Harry realised what he'd taken for some sort of horrible tentacle was a long feather in the cavalier hat of Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Draco, pale as one himself, was still shaking.

"What's all this, then?" Nick said, his floating head peering at them, turning this way and that. The rest of his body was hidden by the floor and the cauldron; it must have been a favourite trick of his, because Neville paid it no mind in the slightest, though it was rather creepy to see just a head floating there. "Having a party, are we?"

"You scared the life out of Draco," Neville chuckled, and Draco, crawling back towards the cauldron, smacked him across the shoulders. Padma found her wand and muttered "lumos omni," re-lighting the candles in their wall-brackets.

"That's very cheerful," Nick said approvingly. "But what're the four of you doing out of dormitory after-hours? That's a detention offence, you know. I ought to report all of you."

"Oh, don't," Padma pleaded. "Please don't, Nick, we were only having a little fun."

"It was my idea," Draco stammered.

"We weren't hurting anyone," Harry put in. "We were doing a Hallowe'en ritual!" he added brightly. "It's like extra classwork! You wouldn't turn us in for doing homework after lights-out, would you?"

Nick seemed to ponder this, as he rose up through the floor. He ended sitting crosslegged a few feet above the cauldron, looking down at the four of them, who had huddled together a little in the face of sudden near-parental authority.

"You'd better tell me what you were up to," he said. "And then I'll decide."

Draco and Neville quickly sketched out between them what they were doing, while Harry quietly gathered up the potions supplies in the background and made ready to make a quick getaway -- not that it would do any good against a ghost, but one never knew. Besides, he liked keeping things tidy.

"Well, seeing as how it was for Hallowe'en and that troll ruined it, I think you might be forgiven, " Nick said finally. "I was most depressed, he wrecked my Death-Day celebration too. I was executed on October thirty-first, you know."

"Really?" Draco asked interestedly. "Chop your head off, did they?"

"Nearly," Nick said with a sigh.

"Oh. I suppose that's how you got your name."

"He's quick," Neville muttered sarcastically, to Padma.

"Alas, yes. And I was supposed to join the Headless Hunt this year, too," Nick said morosely.

"Can't you join?" Padma asked.

"They said it has to be all the way off," Nick sighed. "Otherwise I can't pitch in when it's my turn to be the ball in Headless Lacross and whatnot."

The others looked a little green at this, but Nick continued, oblivious. "One little bit of skin and muscle, you know, it really is ridiculous -- you'd think they could have finished the job. If there's one thing I hate, it's slapdash work."

"I'm very sorry," Padma said sympathetically.

All four of them jumped when a loud noise blared echoingly, and even Nick clapped his hands over his ghostly ears.

"Peeves!" Nick roared. "Stop that this instant!"

"First years out of dormitories!" Peeves blared like a foghorn, pointing.

"Oh hell, let's get out of here," Draco said, grabbing the cauldron and bolting for the door. Neville and Padma were on his heels, Harry scrabbling after them, ripping his parchment in the process as he shouldered his bag. Peeves followed them, still shouting, and they could hear Filch on the stairs.

"Back inside!" Harry called, and they ran through the room, kicking the cushions into the shadowy corners as they made for the little stairwell down to the fourth floor. Nick was still shouting at Peeves, who was apparently enjoying noisemaking so much that he didn't notice them disappearing down the stairs.

They ran through the fourth-floor room and came out onto a landing, looking around frantically.

"This way," Padma said, grabbing Neville's wrist and dragging him towards the end of the hall. "I know a passage up to the towers -- good luck!" she called over her shoulder.

Harry and Draco looked at each other.

"We are in so much trouble," Draco said.

"Maybe Filch'll go after them instead," Harry answered. "Come on, I bet there's some stairs this way. Once we hit the ground floor we'll be all right..."

He led the pale-haired boy under a low archway and down a small side-corridor, which ended in a spiral staircase that he hoped would take them all the way down, though it looked like it ended on the third floor --

They came out into a fairly large room, lit by high windows, and Harry was two steps in before Draco grabbed him and pulled him back into the stairwell.

"What are you on abo -- " Harry began, but then he saw where Draco's shaking hand was pointing.

An enormous dog, bigger than Padfoot and at least twice as wide, was creeping towards them. Its head was lowered, hackles raised, and it was growling viciously.

Heads.

Its heads were lowered, and six pairs of eyes watched them. Heads. It had three heads. It was a three-headed dog...

It snarled and charged, and Harry fell backwards on the stairs. There was a pained yelp as one of the heads collided with the wall, and the middle head extended as far as it could, snapping viciously at Harry's feet. It was close enough for Harry to see that it wore a collar with a shiny brass tag reading "Fluffy" on it.

Draco, squirming out from underneath him, pulled him up the stairs until they were just around the curve of the stairwell, gasping for breath.

"What was that?" Draco asked.

"That was a bloody three-headed dog!" Harry shouted. "What did it look like it -- mmmf..."

Draco clapped a hand over Harry's mouth and jerked his head at the top of the stairs. "Filch," he whispered. Harry nodded.

"That was a dog with three heads," Harry whispered urgently. "Three heads!"

"This is the east wing, isn't it?" Draco asked. "I think that's the third-floor corridor we're not supposed to go into."

"I can see why," Harry answered.

"What do we do now?" Draco asked. Harry tried to catch his breath. "I mean, if it's a choice between detention and being devoured by a three-headed dog, lead the way to Filch..."

They fell silent, as much as they could, and listened. Downstairs they could hear Fluffy breathing heavily, snorting and investigating the steps; Harry hoped the fact that there was no door on the stairwell meant that the dog couldn't get into it. Upstairs, all seemed quiet.

"I bet he's looking around in the room," he said. "You get everything?"

"I think so," Draco said. "Cept for my parchment, but you grabbed that, I saw you."

"No, I took mine..." Harry reached into his bag. He felt Snake shift in his pocket; the silly creature hadn't even woken. He unrolled the parchment in the dark stairwell --

And Draco's strangely animalian fortune glowed up at him.

Harry cursed very inventively in Welsh for a little while, and sat on the step.

"Filch can't prove it's yours," Draco said consolingly, sitting on the step above him. "And I reckon he won't look down here. We could just hide here for a while. Unless Peeves finds us." He leaned against the wall, tapping it idly with his knuckles. "It's a good hiding place," he pronounced, with the air of a connoisseur. "We can sneak back in a bit."

Draco slipped down a step, so that he and Harry were hip-to-hip. They sat for a while, each lost in their private thoughts, until Draco turned and looked at him from under a fringe of pale hair.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Can I ask you something, Harry?"

"Sure, I guess," Harry said, still rather angry about the parchment, more at himself than anyone else.

"What's it like, living with your godfather? Is he nice?"

"Sirius?" Harry looked at Draco, surprised. "You've met him."

"Yeah, but...living with a person, I mean, it's different. He seems nice, and he sends you things and all, and you get letters from him and his butler too, which is pretty cool. But people who seem nice sometimes...aren't."

"Yeah, he's great," Harry said, ignoring the butler remark. Remus had told him not to bother correcting people. "It's just like having a dad, I guess. I don't remember my dad, but it seems that way."

"I don't remember mine either."

They lapsed into silence, ears straining to hear footsteps or Filch's low voice on the landing above. Finally, Harry gathered up his bag.

"I think it'd be safe, if we went now," he said hesitantly. Draco nodded, and they made their way cautiously towards ground level, finally parting with whispered "good luck!"s to each other when they reached the stairs to the Hufflepuff dormitory.

Harry saw Professor Snape's light on, as he passed into the Slytherin dungeons, but he paid it no mind; Professor Snape did seem the type, after all, to be working late. He paused when he heard Professor Snape, apparently talking to someone; he couldn't hear who the other person was -- they must be too far from the door. He pressed his ear to it without even hesitating.

"I thought it best to keep this private," Professor Snape said, his voice cold and hard. He'd never heard Snape use quite that tone before. "Wouldn't do for word to spread about the Philosopher's Stone, now would it?"

A murmured reply that Harry strained to hear, but his bag creaked and he missed it; Snape's reply came hard on its heels, or perhaps interrupted it. The words were like a whipcrack. "Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

Harry caught his breath.

"You don't want me as your enemy. You know perfectly well what I mean."

Harry grinned. He wasn't quite sure what was going on, but his professor had the upper hand, and that was the important thing.

"We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

Harry heard someone walking towards the door, and fled; the last thing he needed tonight, after being chased by Filch and nearly eaten by a three-headed dog (a three-headed dog!), was to get caught eavesdropping on his Head of House. He nearly ran through the Common Room, barely pausing to drop his bag and lift Snake into his box on the nightstand before slipping into bed, not breathing easily until he could no longer be even suspected of having been elsewhere.

He lay in the bed and tried to digest what he'd just heard. Professor Snape knew about the dog -- well, of course he did, he was a professor at the school. The injury he'd had yesterday was suddenly beginning to make more sense. He was trying to get past the dog, to get to something else...the Philosopher's Stone? Or perhaps he'd put the dog there in the first place. Perhaps...

But the bed was warm, and before Harry could puzzle out what was going on, he was drifting off; his last conscious thought was that Professor Snape did not really seem like a 'dog' sort of person.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 12

When they met the next morning for breakfast, Harry was relieved to see that everyone was in one piece; apparently nobody'd been caught and, over toast and cereal, they took turns telling their stories. Padma had been the one Peeves had followed, but she'd lost him in the maze of corridors and stairways leading to the Ravenclaw eyrie, and at least Filch had followed Draco and Harry instead. Neville had fled to Gryffindor at top speed and said he had been too excited and nervous to sleep, and just a little afraid that Filch had seen him and would be coming after him. Instead of going to bed, he'd gone down to the Common Room and sat and talked some more with Nearly Headless Nick.

"You look knackered," Draco said.

"Going to go back to sleep, I think, in a bit," Neville yawned, "now that I know Filch followed you two. Had a thought, though."

"Mark your calendar," Padma teased. Neville stuck his tongue out at her.

"I was talking with Nearly Headless Nick about how he couldn't join the Headless Hunt," Neville continued. "And I had this idea, maybe...well. We all did what Draco wanted to do, I thought perhaps we could take turns..."

"Doing divinations?" Draco asked, delicately pulling the crusts off of his toast.

"No," Neville said scornfully. "Er...I guess you could call it having adventures."

"I think I've had quite enough adventure for one school year," Padma sighed.

Neville looked crestfallen. "But it'd be a good deed..."

Draco leaned forward. "What is it?"

"Well. Nick and I were talking and I thought there might be a way to...get him into the Headless Hunt. It's some work, mind you, but..."

"Is there?" Harry asked warily. "A way, I mean?"

"Should be," Draco said thoughtfully, apparently catching Neville's drift. "Where's he buried?"

"Some chapel in the forest, on a trail off the road to Hogsmeade," Neville answered.

"Oh, I read about that in Hogwarts, A History," Harry exclaimed. "Back in the early days they had a lot of Christians at the school and they insisted they needed a chapel -- "

"-- so they built one down by the river," Padma finished. "Well, what used to be a river. It's in the middle of the forest now, though. People stopped using it a few centuries ago."

"Why?" Draco asked interestedly.

"Dunno," Harry said. "Book didn't say."

"Anyway, he said he was under a stone down there," Neville said. "He got very nostalgic about it, said it was awfully nice for a ghost to have a good-looking grave. He says he goes down and sits and looks at it sometimes."

Padma looked horrified at the notion. "How depressing!"

"He doesn't think so," Neville answered.

"Could you take us there?" Draco asked.

"What're you going to do?" Harry demanded. Draco gave him a wolfish smile.

"Me?" he asked. "Neville did say he wanted us all to do it."

"It's, er..." Neville looked uncomfortable. "Well. It's a very traditional magical activity in some circles...."

"Neville," Padma warned.

"I thought we might go grave-robbing," Neville blurted.

It took some time to plan everything out, which was probably just as well; Padma and Harry had both been shocked at the idea, at first. Even Draco, who'd caught onto it early, was squeamish about actually doing it. Still, Neville reasonably pointed out that they'd have Nick's permission, so it wasn't really grave-robbing. It was more like...grave re-decorating. And they had to admit that when Neville asked Nick about it, the ghost's whole face lit up.

"It won't be any work at all -- just a little chop," he said, and Padma looked a little green. "I had a good preservation spell put on; as a ghost one can insist on this kind of thing, but I never even thought of anything like this...."

Padma, out of habit and possibly to get accustomed to the idea, began doing extra-curricular reading on the history of magical grave-robbing, which ran mostly to Dark Arts tools and necromancy. Harry, feeling Padma was more than up to the task, read fictional Muggle books about it instead, and passed on the juicy bits at mealtimes and during their study-sessions. Neville, ever-practical, planned it for the last week-end before the Christmas holiday, and began stockpiling what Harry referred to as 'the tools of the Resurrection-Man's trade': he badgered the Weasley twins into showing him some spells for lifting stones and picking locks, 'borrowed' a crowbar from the strange assortment of Muggle tools behind Hagrid's shed, and got Nick to help him draw a map of the chapel. When it came to thinking up ways to actually get to the chapel, he was out of luck, but that was what Draco was for. Each plan the pale-haired boy came up with was more devious and amusingly complex than the last, like the game of Mousetrap that Remus used to have under the desk at Sandust, back before they'd moved to Wales.

Still, despite their intricate planning, they had schoolwork to do, and Quidditch season was fast approaching. Harry, at team-practice three times a week, often came to the study sessions exhausted and simply sat, chin propped on hands and eyelids drooping, listening while the others swapped research. Poor Neville was still blowing things up in Potions and Draco, despite extra homework, continued to transfigure things into flat things rather than the things they were intended to be. Padma patiently walked them through what they were doing wrong, and only occasionally did they get to pay her back by mocking her inability to remember the proper names for the constellations in Astronomy class.

Harry occasionally wondered if it was odd that he seemed to be competent, if not exactly stellar, in almost everything, but there wasn't a whole lot of time to meditate on it. His first Quidditch game was fast approaching, and although he felt ready, Marcus Flint was not free with his praise for the young, attention-grabbing newest member of the team.

And then there was Wood.

When he was eight or nine, Harry had been allowed to visit Hogwarts and even stay overnight at the invitation of Oliver Wood, who'd taken a shine to the small, dark-haired boy known as Parvus. There were times Harry had wanted nothing more than to be Oliver Wood, to be a Quidditch player in a scarlet uniform and know all about all the different teams. Now he was a first year and Oliver was in fifth, and they were in different houses; Oliver knew Harry had been Parvus, but they had no real reason to speak, and Harry knew it was cool to ignore the first-years.

Still, he often caught Oliver watching him, once he'd been recruited to Slytherin and word had more or less gotten out. He didn't know what to do; if a fifth-year disliked him there was not much that could be done, he supposed.

Oliver was still his Quidditch idol, all the more so now that he was a Captain and not just equipment-boy. Harry worried about playing against Gryffindor in their first game, and what Oliver would think of him if Slytherin won -- or if they lost. He would fly his best, of course, but if his best wasn't good enough, or if his heart wasn't in it, he knew he'd fail. And if he lost his first ever game, there was also Professor Snape's disapproval to consider.

The night before his first game, Harry was trying to soothe his nerves in the library, hiding amongst the books. He'd pretended to read for a while before giving up, and soon he'd have to go back to the dormitories, but at least then he could pretend to sleep. He wasn't expecting anyone to come across him, but as he was preparing to tidy away his schoolwork and go back to the dungeons, a shadow blocked out the light from the candles in the wall-brackets.

Harry looked up into Oliver's face, and swallowed.

"Harry," Oliver said, and sat down. "Can I have a word?"

Harry nodded, heart thudding in his ribcage. What if Oliver threatened him, or told him not to play...

"Listen, Potter," Oliver tried again, then sighed. "I thought for sure you'd be Gryffindor," he said. "When you went up to be Sorted, I mean."

"Sorry," Harry murmured, acutely aware of another person he'd disappointed by being Slytherin.

"No, I mean, you still seem like a decent kid," Oliver said, "It's just, you know. I was waiting for Parvus to come back to school so he could join the Gryffindor team, eventually."

"Oh."

"And nobody expected that you'd make the team in your first year, lucky sod," Oliver added. Harry glanced at his face, and saw an odd half-affection there. "So...."

"So," Harry echoed.

"Good luck tomorrow," Oliver said, holding out a hand. Harry stared at it dumbly before realising he should shake it. "Play like hell, Potter. Gryffindor isn't going to go easy on you lot. Must say I'd half like to see you win, just to wipe that smirk off Flint's face the next time he tries to tell me

he's got to babysit you on the field."

Harry grinned a little. The babysitting quip didn't hurt; it was a long-standing joke on the Slytherin team.

"Doesn't mean you're going to win, though," Oliver added, rising to go. "I won't lie and say that winning isn't everything, but I'll give you this advice for free: people remember blokes who played well and honourably more than they remember who won, ten years down the line. You play a good game and you have nothing to be ashamed of. Or afraid of."

Watching Oliver, Harry nodded belatedly, and stood as well. "Why're you telling me this?" he blurted, as Oliver began to walk away. The boy turned as he walked, and grinned.

"Little firstie like yourself needs all the help he can get," he said, and vanished around a corner. Harry gathered up his bag and papers and left the nearly-empty library, heading towards his dormitory and his bed. He didn't think he'd sleep much; now that he knew what was expected of him, he had a whole new set of worries.

The following morning dawned clear and sunny, and Harry was woken by Snake tickling his ear with his forked tongue, demanding eggs for breakfast. He was late getting to the dining hall and the other three had already gone to their separate tables, but Draco and Neville waved at him and Padma gave him a broad grin. Neville was wearing Gryffindor colours -- of course he would have to, Harry realised, after a brief pang of betrayal -- but Padma had a green bow tied around her braid, and Draco's highly-prized yellow tie had been charmed green, probably by an older student.

Snake happily devoured the runny yolk on his fried egg while Harry was distracted keeping Crabbe and Goyle from pulling a just-arrived Hedwig's tailfeathers, until finally Hedwig snapped at Crabbe's hand and flew off in a huff, leaving Harry with two letters, one sealed with Sirius' scarlet wax and one with an elaborate fold Remus liked to use. He opened Remus' first; it was a page-long letter, not unusual for Remus. Skimming it, Harry realised it was meant to be a soothing distraction from pre-game jitters, full of news from Diagon Alley and polite gossip about the customers at Madam Schaeffer's shop. He folded it and tucked it in his pocket, turning to Sirius' more imposing-looking note. He slit the wax with his butter-knife and unfolded it, warily.

Inside was an inky canine nose-print and only a few scrawled words:

Fly them in circles, pup. Up Slytherin.

Love, Sirius.

PS: If you show this to Snape I'll be forced to disown you.

Harry grinned, put Sirius' letter next to Remus' in his pocket and picked up Snake. Marcus Flint was rising too, gesturing for the team to finish their meals, and across the room Oliver Wood was already leading the Gryffindor team out of the dining hall.

Harry was used to the peculiar quirks of Quidditch uniforms by now. He strapped up his greaves and shin-guards almost mindlessly, stomach churning despite Wood's advice and his godfather's unexpected support of Slytherin. He set Snake in a little drawer in his locker that he'd lined with rags and, with a whispered promise that he'd be back to collect him after the game, followed the others out onto the Quidditch pitch. They mounted up, the game-balls were released...and the game was on.

This...this was Quidditch. This was the game, the Game that Oliver used to talk about; never mind that most of his fellow teammates persisted in cheating or that Gryffindor scored the first points. Harry was a Seeker for a real Quidditch team and he had a job to do, and he was doing it.

And from where he sat the game was beautiful.

Forget Cricket, which next to Quidditch was a clumsy earthbound children's sport; forget the first time he'd ridden the bicycle by himself or the first time Sirius had taken him on the motorbike. Nothing compared to flying, nothing compared to Quidditch.

"-- that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and -- OUCH -- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger -- "

He followed the action from a position above it, circling a little lower and to the east of the Gryffindor seeker. Sirius had written to him in the past few weeks, and though it was never obvious, each letter had devoted at least a few lines to Quidditch; only the third or fourth mention of his father that Sirius had ever made said that James had always made their house Seeker fly lower than the other, the better to see the pitch. It had gone off into a discussion of height versus visibility, but that was what had stayed in Harry's mind -- what his father had done.

" -- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins -- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger -- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which -- "

Harry took a moment to inventively but affectionately curse the Weasley twins.

" -- Pucey regains the Quaffle, anyway, and he's off dodging another Bludger, excellent double-teaming by the Weasleys -- "

Harry, half-listening to Lee Jordan's commentary, thought he saw a glimmer of gold just above Madam Hooch's ear; yes, the stiff, fixed way she was sitting -- she knew the Snitch was hovering near her head, but she wasn't about to give anything away.

Harry glanced up, and saw the Gryffindor Seeker's eyes on him; he very casually drifted his broomstick away from Madam Hooch, directly into the flightpath of a Bludger. Feigning surprise, he dove for the other way, and the other Seeker saw the Snitch too, but too late; Harry was after the little golden ball, which had zipped away from Madam Hooch as soon as she'd moved aside in anticipation of Harry's charge.

" -- Potter's seen the Snitch! And he's off after it while Wood blocks a throw by the Slytherin Chaser -- gameplay slows as attention is divided between Quaffle and Snitch -- "

The Gryffindor Seeker on his heels, Harry flew past the rest of the game, oblivious to anything but the Snitch in front of him, trusting that the Slytherin Beaters would protect him. He remembered suddenly the first time he'd seen a real one, that afternoon on the pitch when he was eight and a Slytherin girl had shown it to him. He'd reached out just like this, to beat her to the grab --

WHAM! A Bludger slammed into the back of his broom and sent him spinning, his movements making the Gryffindor Seeker tilt off-balance as well; when they finally got control again, the Snitch was long gone. Harry glanced over his shoulder at one of the Weasley twins, who grinned and wagged his fingers in front of his nose, teasingly, before returning to the game. The other Seeker drifted up again, but Harry, on a hunch, dove low. He scanned the bottom of the field curiously, before rising up through the game, blocking a Gryffindor Chaser on his way, and let himself drift towards the Slytherin goal-hoops.

" -- a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble -- "

When I'm Captain, Harry thought, We're going to stop giving away points by fouling the other team...or at least have a Keeper who specialises in protecting against Penalty shots...

He was scanning the field, eye catching a flash of green or scarlet occasionally, when his broom suddenly...lurched.

He gripped it tightly with both hands, surprised, and lifted his face to feel if there was a backdraft coming from somewhere, but the air was still and calm; just then the broom bucked, and he nearly slid off, holding tighter still. He glanced around to see if there was a Bludger following him, but nothing was in sight.

As he turned back, it pulled a complete three-sixty turn and he slewed around, unable to get his balance before it bucked again, and for a terrifying moment his body was in the air. He caught his ankles around the stick, re-seating himself, and suddenly realised he was in a lot of trouble...

"What's going on?" Padma demanded, as Draco gazed through his omnioculars at the distant figure in green. They'd been a bribe from his mother, one of the few things he'd ever actually asked her for, in return for having to go to Diagon Alley all by himself. He adjusted a knob and they zoomed in another fraction on Harry, who was hanging onto his broomstick for dear life.

"I can't tell!" he said, panicked. "His broomstick's gone wrong somehow, it looks like it's trying to buck him off -- "

"Let me see!" she implored, and he thrust the brass object at her, twisting his hands in his lap as she peered through them.

"It looks like the charms are breaking down, but it's a brand new broom, he told us himself -- " she said. "Look, nobody's even noticed. Someone should do something!"

""Slytherin in possession -- Flint with the Quaffle -- passes Spinnet -- passes Bell -- hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose -- only joking, Professor -- Slytherins score -- "

"Come on, someone's got to see this," Padma said, looking around frantically. They had gone to sit with the Ravenclaws, since Ravenclaw was right across the aisle from Slytherin and wouldn't mind two Slytherin-supporters in their midst. Draco took the omnioculars back and adjusted the focus outward.

"Oh -- they're not -- " he gasped. "Padma, the Slytherins know, but they're not doing a thing -- there goes one of the redheaded boys from Gryffindor -- "

One of the Weasley brothers had seen Harry's erratic movements and seemed to understand what they meant, but Harry was drifting higher and higher away from the game, and the old broomstick Fred -- George? -- was on didn't have as much speed as a Nimbus.

Padma grabbed Draco and dragged him out of his seat. "Look, Professor Snape's seen -- he's got to do something, come on..."

She led Draco through the stands, towards Professor Snape, whose eyes were fixed on Harry. He seemed paralysed; his lips were moving slightly, but he wasn't doing anything to draw attention to Harry.

Then Harry's broomstick gave a wild jerk and Harry finally fell off, dangling by a hand; now people in the stands were beginning to notice, but Padma, panicked, was hell-bent on reaching Snape. In her haste she dragged Draco down the bench-row, and just as she reached Snape, Draco tripped on a cloak-edge from someone in the row below and tumbled into him, catching himself by grabbing at someone's hair. There was a pained cry, and he picked himself up, going pale.

"P...Professor Quirrell," he stammered. "Oh -- oh I'm sorry -- "

Quirrell was staring up at him, rubbing his scalp and scowling.

"Clumsy ch-child!" he managed, before there was another gasp from the crowd. "Insol-I-I -- oh!"

Even the crowd was paying attention to Harry now -- everyone but Marcus Flint and the other Weasley twin, who were engaged in some kind of bizarre one-on-one game that involved a Bludger and a lot of dodging. Padma was pleading with Professor Snape, who ignored her entirely as he stood and vaulted over the edge of the stands, landing in the commentator's box on the other side of the wall. Draco was dusting Quirrell off and doing more harm than good as he tried at once not to annoy him and yet to re-order the professor's short brown hair somehow.

Padma heard Snape shouting at McGonagall; she made out "broomstick" and "stopping play" and "Snitch" before a sigh rushed through the crowd. Harry had regained his seating on his broomstick with the help of one of the Weasleys, who had hauled him up by the seat of his trousers.

From the middle of the Slytherin box, she and Draco stood and stared as Harry began a long descent back towards the pitch, and the rest of both teams began to get their bearings and join in the solitary game Flint and the Weasley boy had been playing. Madam Hooch was flying up to meet Harry, but just then he changed course, abruptly, and Padma sucked in a breath, worried that his broomstick was malfunctioning again. He shot straight as an arrow towards the stands, however, and if one could skid in midair, Harry did so, sliding around and holding out his hand just above Lee Jordan's head.

The smack of the Snitch in Harry's glove was the best sound Padma or Draco had ever heard, shortly followed by the sound of Harry's boots on wood as he dropped into the commentators' box.

Harry, landing between Lee Jordan and Professor McGonagall, held out the Snitch for their inspection, with what looked like an almost hysterical calm.

"Potter...has the Snitch," Lee said slowly, staring at the little ball. "And that's...the end of the game."

"What's the score?" Padma heard Professor Snape demand.

"The score? The score..." Lee had to look up at the charmed scoreboard before he could announce it. "Slytherin wins, one-hundred and eighty points to seventy."

Harry climbed down the ladder from the announcers' box to the grass of the pitch as the others began to land, and ran past Flint completely to grab Oliver Wood's sleeve as he was talking to the Weasleys.

"I didn't mean to," he said, as Oliver turned. "We can play it again -- I'm sorry -- "

Oliver looked down at him, blinking.

"Course he didn't mean to," Fred said. "Listen, a first-year doesn't jump off his broom in the middle of a Quidditch game just to create a diversion, even a Slytherin first-year. It's suicide. He wasn't playing about up there. You all right, Harry?"

"Fine," Harry breathed. "It can't have been legal, someone must have called a time out before I caught the Snitch."

"Afraid not," Oliver said reluctantly. "Fair's fair."

"But nobody was playing!"

"Flint was," George said furiously. "Did you see him?"

"So were you." Fred poked his brother in the ribs.

"You told me to!"

"I never did!"

"You said 'I'm going to get Harry, be here and stay down!'"

"I said 'I'm going to get Harry before he falls down!'"

"Quiet," said a new voice, and Harry looked up to see Professor Snape looming over them. "Harry, Madam Pomfrey wishes to see you. Professor McGonagall has your broomstick."

"But I -- "

"Go, before I'm forced to take points from my own House."

Harry gave Oliver a last apologetic look, and brushed past the Professor. As he went, he heard Snape say, "Is there any objection amongst the Gryffindor team to the legality of Mr. Potter's catch?"

Harry paused.

"No, sir," Oliver answered. "Fred's sure it was an accident."

"I am equally sure it was not," Snape said, and Harry's heart sank for a second, before he added "That broomstick was hexed. I should like to know by whom. Rest assured, if it is a Gryffindor, Professor McGonagall and I -- "

He had half-turned as he spoke, and caught Harry lingering.

"Potter! Pomfrey this instant!" he snapped. Harry fled, to where Padma, Neville, and Draco were waiting for him with Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall. He was immediately surrounded by students, pounding him on the shoulders and shaking him cheerfully; Madam Pomfrey was shouting for them to stop it this instant, that he could be hurt and should be seen to, but Harry had never felt happier in his whole life.

The thrill of Harry's victory lasted the rest of the day and well into the school week; to be a first-year playing with the big kids was cool enough, but to have won the game after almost falling to his death...that was something else again. The rest of the school didn't seem as bitter about Slytherin's victory as Harry thought they would be; this may have been because of Draco and Padma's deft handling of their respective houses, and Oliver Wood threatening to take a Beaters' bat to anyone who grumbled.

Professor McGonagall went over every inch of his broomstick and could find nothing wrong with it; likewise, Madam Pomfrey said he didn't appear to be under any curses. Harry hadn't heard what Professor Snape said to Professor McGonagall, but Neville, meaning to come by his Head of House's office to ask about a homework assignment, had lingered just close enough to get the gist of it; Snape was sure someone had hexed his broomstick, and didn't know who, though apparently he had suspicions he wasn't willing to share with McGonagall yet.

"Could be him, you know," Padma said, over a study-session-turned-gossip-meeting. Harry glared at her. "Well, if I were hexing you I'd do that to put people off the scent. So would you. That's Slytherin for you."

"What reason would Professor Snape have to hex me?"

"What reason would anyone else?" Neville asked. "Anyway, I wouldn't be surprised if Flint got mad at you for stealing the limelight and did it himself."

"A student couldn't do that kind of magic, not during a match, not against a Nimbus," Draco pointed out. "Maybe it was just...a freak accident or something. And if you had been killed," he said, drawing them back to the reason they were there, "Then at least you wouldn't have to write nine inches for Transfiguration. Ech."

"Nine? Everyone else only has six," Padma said.

"Well, everyone else makes their bowls look like goblets," Draco said embarrassedly. "Not dinner plates."

"Still flattening?" Neville asked sympathetically.

"It's just so boring, making a bowl look like a basically bowl-shaped thing," Draco said. "I lose interest and wham. Dinner plate."

"Maybe you should make it look like a really fancy dinner plate," Harry said. "I mean, if you're going to be bad at something, you should be bad at it with style."

"Slytherins," Padma muttered.

"Speaking of which, did you hear about the Gryffindors blowing up the Potions classroom last night?" Draco said, leaning in close. Neville put a hand over his face.

"I heard something explode, but sometimes that's just Professor Snape making something complicated. He says sometimes potions are supposed to -- "

"No, tell us about it," Padma asked Neville, interrupting Harry. "What happened?"

"Well, Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnegan got in trouble for something or other -- Neville, do you know?"

"No," Neville said, from behind his hands.

"Anyhow, they had a detention from Snape and they were supposed to be organising the potions supply jars. So the rest of the Gryffindors decided to go help them out -- " Draco snickered at Harry and Padma's mutual eye-rolling, "Except Neville, cos he was with me going over Astronomy. They

all trooped down there and Granger said she knew a spell that would do it."

"Granger knows spells for everything," Neville moaned.

"I bet she doesn't know -- " Padma began hotly, taking the remark as a personal challenge, but Harry waved a hand to stop her.

"Go on, Draco," he said.

"Well, apparently her spell worked okay but she organised them alphabetically and they're supposed to be arranged so that the most-used stuff is lower down. Which meant Lavender Brown had to have a try and she broke one jar, and then when Ron Weasley tried to clean it up he broke another jar and the two got mixed together and Dean Thomas dropped the jar he was holding and the whole thing exploded." Draco chuckled. Neville moaned again. "So there they all were and Professor Snape came in and found the entire Gryffindor first-year class standing around with their hair on end and soot all over their faces..."

"Six million points from Gryffindor!" Harry said, in a passable imitation of Professor Snape. He'd been working on it.

"Something like that," Draco agreed. "And now they've all got detention together scrubbing out the hospital ward."

"And they all hate me cos I didn't come along," Neville sighed, folding his hands on the table and resting his chin on them.

"You don't care what a load of Gryffindors think, do you?" Harry asked.

"I happen to be a Gryffindor, thanks," Neville answered.

"But you don't, do you? I mean, clearly you are in superior company," Harry gestured at himself, Draco and Padma with a smirk.

"Yeah, but..." Neville wrinkled his nose. "You ever feel like you're a bit of an outsider in your own House?"

Padma gave him a blank look. Draco pursed his lips, and Harry tilted his head.

"I mean. Ron and Granger are practically joined at the hip with Finnegan, and Dean Thomas says Parvati's already his girlfriend -- "

"Tsk, Parvati," Padma murmured reprovingly.

"And Parvati and Lavender are really good friends...I dunno. It seems like I ought to be friends with some of them, you know? That's the whole point of being Sorted, innit?"

Harry considered. "Yeah, well, Theo hangs out with Crabbe and Goyle, but that's just as well, 'cause I don't like them much. And I spend a lot of time with the older kids at Quidditch practice...although they make a lot of jokes I don't always get," he admitted.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Padma said. "I study with other Ravenclaws all the time. I'm just glad Parvati and I didn't get Sorted together."

"It's a bit different in Hufflepuff," Draco said, drawing one knee up against his chest and wrapping an arm around it, hooking the heel of his shoe on the edge of the chair. "Everyone's quiet, really. I guess we spend a lot of time in the common room together, and my room-mates are all right, but I'd rather be here. I like being a Hufflepuff," he added. "Nobody stares at you funny or anything. And it's the first time I got something I wanted without Mum telling me I had to do something different and getting her way instead."

All four of them fell silent for a while, until Padma cleared her throat.

"Well, this isn't getting our Transfiguration papers done, and we'd better start on that now if Draco's going to have to write an extra three inches," she said. "Who's got a good starting-place?"

Dear Harry,

You should have heard the shouting when we got the evening edition! POTTER SCOOPS SNITCH! It was all over the sports section, though I think it should have been on the front page. Remus says that he's very proud of you, but he thinks the Floo accident at the Ministry of Magic was probably a little more important to get reported above-the-fold. I say he's nuts, what do you think? I'm sending you a copy you can hang over your bed, and one for your locker, and a few for your friends if you like.

I hope you're getting your broomstick checked out. If we need to buy another one, let me know -- the Firebolts are still just prototypes, but Remus apparently has connections I never knew about and we might be able to swing one. It wasn't bucking too badly, was it? It wasn't much covered in the article, and there was just the one photo of you with the Snitch, and you did say you didn't fall or anything. We'll work on dangerous-flying when you come home for the holiday, how's that? Only another few weeks! Andromeda and Ted have already started plotting lots of things for us to do, and Dora -- sorry, TONKS -- says to tell you you're welcome to sing with her and Neville, whatever that means.

I hope you're studying for exams. I hear from Sources that you're doing well in all your classes, so I won't talk any more about THAT.

Let me know where you want to go for Christmas shopping when you come home. We're thinking of taking a trip to Hogsmeade, so perhaps instead of taking the train home we ought to just come and get you from school? What do you think? Moony says we ought to go down to Betwys Beddau and get a goose from the farm down Cwndu road, and some of that fresh plum pudding from the Beddau Bakery, for Christmas dinner. I think he's hinting I ought to take the motorbike. Haven't been allowed to take her out in ages and she's going to be touchy with me if I don't at least fly her around a bit soon. Can you imagine me flying all over with a goose strapped to one side of the motorbike and a pudding on the other?

Ted and Andromeda and TONKS send their love. And so does Moony, but he's sending you a letter himself.

Sirius

PS: What a silly question, Harry. It doesn't matter to me what house you're in or who your friends are, so long as they're good friends. I will never love you any less for anything you do.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 13

Buoyed by Harry's success on the Quidditch field, they planned the "excursion with Nick", as Draco called it, for the last Friday before the Christmas holidays, just after exams. Harry, who had spent much of his early life observing other children rather than playing with them, noticed Draco's excitement wax and wane; it was as though the trip was the ultimate dare, like climbing the big standing stone at the edge of his village in Wales, the one with the really big spikes the village put up to stop people climbing on it. Neville and Padma were more level-headed about it, but Draco's good cheer was infectious.

And he noticed when Draco showed up pale and withdrawn to the study-group one day. Padma and Neville didn't -- they were deep in a discussion of revision technique for mid-year exams. They beckoned for Draco to join them, but when Draco simply sat in his chair and stared at his open book without really looking at it, his pale bangs falling in his eyes, Harry edged his chair over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Going to study?" he asked. "We're all sat over here."

"Sure..." Draco said, but he didn't move. "In a bit."

"Did McGonagall give you another horrible big book to read over holidays?"

"No."

"Professor Snape still ignoring you?"

"I don't mind being ignored. He's pretty mean sometimes. And I don't usually get stuff wrong, so it's not like I need as much attention as Neville does."

Harry bit his lip. "You look awful."

"Thanks."

"I mean -- "

"I'm not going home for Christmas," Draco said suddenly, a little more loudly than he should have; Padma and Neville looked up from their books. He dropped his voice, cheeks colouring. "Professor McGonagall came around today with the list and my name was already on it. Mum owed Dumbledore. She didn't even ask me."

"But -- that'll be fun. You'll have lots of free time," Neville said encouragingly. "You can play in the snow -- "

"Lots of time to revise for the spring," Padma put in. Neville elbowed her. "What? Draco likes revising."

"And it's not like..." Harry paused. "If I was still living with...with my relatives, I wouldn't really...want to go home."

Draco made a quiet little noise that the other three chose to ignore.

"Well, there's still this weekend and the Excursion," Neville said. "And exams'll keep you busy -- and I'm sure you could...well, Hagrid always likes visitors, and eating one of his scones takes up pretty much all of an afternoon..."

"And we'll all send you things, won't we?" Harry said. "Neville and I'll send you a postcard and I'm sure Andromeda's going to have presents for you."

"Yeah," Draco agreed, and he did seem to brighten a little. "You think?"

"She likes you," Neville said. "You're family, course she will. And I bet your mum sends you something terrifically expensive to make up for it."

"If she remembers," Draco said, with a dry little smile. "She forgot Christmas one year."

Horried silence followed.

"It's all right, the house-elves made me a lovely book to write in -- " Draco paused. "And, and...Mendy always makes lots of sweets...."

"That's awful," said Padma quietly.

"It's all right, really, like you said, Aunt Andromeda's sure to send me something."

"Did she say you had to stay at Hogwarts?" Harry asked suddenly. Draco gave him a funny look.

"My name's on the list. She told the Headmaster," he said, blankly.

"Yeah, but it's..." Harry wasn't sure how to ask "It's just because she doesn't want you home, isn't it?" so he changed tactics. "Would she mind awfully if you stayed with Andromeda? That'd be neat, wouldn't it? We'd have enough to play a decent game of Exploding Snap without having to make Remus play, then."

"But I haven't been asked..." Draco said, glancing at Neville, looking almost afraid.

"Er." Neville blinked. "Do you need to be?"

"S'polite," Draco muttered. "Not supposed to invite yourself over."

"Oh, well then." Neville sat up very straight and held out his hand. "Mister Malfoy, would you come stay with us for the holiday?"

"You haven't asked your -- "

"Ted and Andromeda won't care, there's lots of room," Neville said easily. "I'll write to them right now if you want, Andromeda can write and ask your mum. I think she likes to write to your mum, cos it annoys her."

Draco grinned a little at that. "Will it be an incon -- "

"Shut up, Malfoy," Neville answered cheerfully, already pulling out a sheet of parchment. Draco subsided into embarrassed happiness, while Neville wrote to Andromeda, his handwriting less legible than Harry's or Draco's but his grammar considerably better. He read it aloud when he was done, to the general approval of the others if not the librarian, who gave them a warning look as she passed (she went easy on them because Harry had asked her if the library had any Kipling and won a lifelong friend in Madam Pince, who owned a first-edition of The Jungle Books in her personal collection.)

As Neville ran off to the Owlery to mail the letter, Padma leaned over, whispering to Harry.

"She will be all right with it, won't she?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "The Tonkses are grand. You should come down too. You'll come shopping at Diagon Alley anyway, won't you?"

"We probably will, we nearly always do," Padma agreed. "I'm looking forward to some quiet, though. Not that it ever is in my house around the holidays, my whole enormous family descends on us sooner or later, but usually I can hide behind the shed in the back garden and Parvati'll draw all the attention."

"Must be nice having siblings," Draco said.

"Depends on the sibling, I guess," Harry answered. "I mean. Neville and I are sort of related to you, but it's...well, Neville picked you to come stay with him and Andromeda picked Sirius to come live with them. I guess if you could pick your family things'd be a bit better. I certainly wouldn't've picked Aunt Petunia as my aunt," he added, wrinkling his nose. "She used to give me socks for Christmas. Old knobbly socks."

"Friends are people who never give you knobbly socks," Draco agreed, and the three of them snickered until Madam Pince gave them their second warning and they all had to hush and bend to their books.

Exams passed in a blur, it seemed, of revision and last-minute research and Padma's utter adherence to the Wisdom of the Flashcard. There was nothing, she firmly believed, that flashcards could not sooner or later solve. The exams weren't all-consumingly important, since even those who failed had the whole spring to improve their marks, but Draco was shocked and pleased to have passed his Transfigurations task adequately all the same.

"What do you mean, you had to turn a mouse into a snuffbox?" Harry asked, as they assembled that Friday, Neville almost leaping around with excitement, Padma calmly double-checking that the crowbar was packed in the bag Harry was carrying and that Draco really did know the sharpening charm in case the knife he'd filched from the kitchen inexplicably went dull on the walk to the chapel.

"Didn't you?" Draco asked, pulling on his gloves. "It came out pretty nice, ivory and red lacquer."

"No, I had to turn paper into cloth," Harry said. He sniffed. "I was trying for silk but I only got muslin."

"I got corduroy," Neville answered.

"You suppose that's better or worse?"

"Dunno. Padma, what'd you get?"

"Linen," Padma said smugly. "All right. It's almost dark and Sir Nicholas said he'd meet us here after sundown -- "

"Speak of the spectre," Nick said, putting his head through a wall. "Hello, children."

"Hello Nick," they chorused, as if he were a professor addressing a class. He smiled a little and floated fully through the wall, putting his hands on his hips.

"Ready to go then, are we?" he asked, eyeing Harry's bulging bag and Draco's determined grip on the map they'd drawn of the chapel. "And if we get separated -- "

"Meet at the sign to Hogsmeade," Padma said quickly.

"Or go back to your dormitory and don't go wandering about where you might get hurt," Nick said sternly. "If I wasn't coming along myself, I would very much frown on this sort of thing. What're you fiddling with, Miss Patil?" he called. Padma dropped the leather case hanging around her neck, quickly.

"I thought -- since nobody's been there in ages, it might be fun to um...take some pictures," she said, her voice dropping in volume on the last few words. "I haven't taken hardly any pictures, school takes too much time..."

"Well, so long as you're not going to photograph me," Nick said.

"Urk. That'd be creepy," Padma said. "I don't like taking pictures of people. I like buildings and trees and things."

Nick looked rather pleased to be considered "people", then gestured them all against a wall as one of the other ghosts came floating around the corner, and drifted by aimlessly.

"As long as we can keep out of Peeves' way, I happen to know Mr. Filch is up on the fourth floor, so we'll have no problems getting out of the castle," Nick said. "Let me have a scout around first."

They waited, huddling a little bit in the shadows, until Nick reappeared from his reconnaissance.

"This way," he whispered, apparently delighted to be sneaking around the school. Harry suspected most of the ghosts were pretty bored, a lot of the time. This must be like some kind of holiday for Nick.

They made it out of the castle all right, except for one of the portraits threatening to call Dumbledore until Nick bribed her with the promise of a new varnish, and crept slowly through the most dangerous part of the trip, at least in their minds -- the wide open fields between the entrance to Hogwarts and the pounded-dirt road to Hogsmeade, crusted with frost in the midwinter cold. Once on the road they'd be partially screened by the trees, and before long would be in the forest itself -- on a trail, yes, but still surrounded on all sides.

"The Romans built this road when they passed through, I hear," Nick said, as they turned onto the flat track to Hogsmeade, the wizarding town beyond Hogwarts where the third-years-and-up were allowed to visit. Harry could see very distant buildings rising up out of the fields. "Very flat, as straight as possible, strong construction charms..."

"Roman wizards wanted to civilise the locals," Harry said, breathing easier now that Hogwarts was out of sight. "I read about it."

"Or conquer," Draco said unexpectedly, and Harry glanced at him. "Well, that's what the Romans did. All the oldest pureblood families in England are descendent from the Roman wizards -- Nigellus, Mulciber -- Malfeus, where Malfoy comes from," he added, with just a slight hint of pride. "Most of the books I read in my father's library say the people who were living here didn't have any magic, but I don't think that's really true."

"Why not?" Harry asked curiously.

"Cos the Romans didn't build that," Draco said, pointing off in the distance. Harry turned to follow his hand, and saw Padma and Neville stopping to do the same. Across the flat farmland that had once been and was still called the Hogsmeade Fens, there were strange stony shapes rising in the distance, sharp-edged in the frosty air.

"Creadonagh valley," Nick nodded. "We used to play war-games there when I was a boy at Hogwarts. Terribly dangerous and foolish, but back then there were a lot more wizards, and surviving Hogwarts was its own final exam."

"It's just a stone circle," Padma said. "There's lots of them in Britain. That doesn't mean they're magical."

"Some of them are," Harry murmured, thinking of Betwys Beddau, the town whose residents lived their whole lives inside a stone circle, and nearby Rhos Y Beddau, where the bogs had eaten the stones back into the earth.

"It's wild magic," Nick said soberly. "Don't you go near it. The Forest is bad enough, but it still follows some law; Creadonagh valley is its own law. Come, children. You'll have to be back in your beds before dawn."

They followed Nick further along until finally a little footpath, lined on either side with rocks and looking like something a child might have devised in a parents' garden, broke off from the main road.

"Don't go outside the stones," Nick warned. "Inside them you're protected by iron charms buried underneath -- works as well on unicorns as it does on the fey, not that the fey are your biggest worry, mind you -- and the rest of the really dangerous ones won't come near the path at any rate."

"Is the chapel safe?" Nick asked. None of them had moved, and Padma and Harry had huddled in closer, staring at the dreary little trail. It dipped down, where it left the Hogsmeade road, and ran straight into the shadows.

"It's holy ground," Nick said simply, and began to drift down the path. He looked a little less translucent, here, as though being closer to his body made him closer to real again himself.

"We're not supposed to go into the forest," Padma whispered.

"We knew we were going to have to," Harry whispered back. "You want to carry the crowbar?"

Padma nodded, looking a little less frightened when she had a long bar of steel in her hand. Harry silently passed Neville the other one, grinning a little at the boy's thankful look.

"Draco, light your wand," Harry whispered, and Draco muttered "Lumos!", brandishing his wand like a sword ahead of him.

"All right then," Neville said.

"All right then," Padma repeated.

Harry, deciding this was getting them nowhere, shoved Draco hard. He stumbled forward onto the trail and nearly fell headlong, but once one of them had stepped off the road, the rest of them felt better about following.

"You didn't have to do that," Draco hissed to Harry, as they made their way down the narrow path.

"I'm a Slytherin. It's what we do," Harry answered. "Keep that wand lit."

Nick was a glowing silver beacon up ahead, which helped light the trail so that they could see well enough not to go off of it; soon Neville and Padma lit their wands, too. Off in the darkness, things scurried and chirped unnaturally.

Harry, who used to make a habit of going to the Muggle cinema with Sirius on weekends when they lived in Little Whinging, half-expected a frog to poke its head out of one of the little brackish ponds near the trail and cry "Edless-orsman!"

"I hear there are werewolves in the Forest," Draco said, and Neville looked like he wished he'd checked to see if it was a full moon.

"Nah," Harry answered, without thinking. "No indoor plumbing." Which was the reason Remus always gave that he didn't like camping. All three of them looked at him strangely, and he shrugged. "They're people a lot more of the time than they're wolves. I wouldn't want to live in here, would you?"

"Look," Neville said, pointing with his lit wand to where Nick's faint glow had vanished and was replaced by the eerie flicker of silvery light through narrow windows. Even in the Forbidden Forest, with things creeping and crawling all around them, they stopped to take in the Hogwarts Chapel.

It was a squat, low building, with thick-looking walls and narrow windows; it looked more like Hagrid's hut than any church Harry had ever seen. Bits of the roof on one side had fallen in, and here and there he could see loose stonework which confirmed his impression that the walls were built more crudely than the graceful gothic arches of Hogwarts. It was a rude little chapel, square and unassuming, as though it had grown up out of the ground.

Despite that, he could tell that there had been additions over the years; wizards couldn't bear to leave well enough alone. The thin arrow-slit windows had been fitted with bright stained-glass at some point, which was cracking in places, although it still seemed mostly intact. There were strange little crenellations poking up from the four corners of the building, and stone carvings, clearly stuck-on after the fact, decorated the eaves, the windowsills, and massive, open doorway. Grinning gargoyles looked down from the tops of the walls, and Harry thought he could make out human figures over the door. Metal straps still hung like horizontal bars across the doorway, though the wood had rotted away.

They hurried down the hill, then, and as they approached Harry saw that two of the door-bars met in a tarnished lock that was still secure; they ducked under the bars and stepped over two others to get inside, Draco examining the lock interestedly as they passed, Padma putting out a finger to touch the figures that seemed to be climbing up the doorway towards some eroded carving at the summit.

"Oh -- it's lovely," Padma said quietly, once they'd stepped over the leaf-detritus on the inside entrance and gotten their first proper view of the inside. The room was small, barely bigger than a Hogwarts classroom, but it was lined with stone benches, carved into graceful curves on either side of a central aisle. Moonlight filtered in through the broken roof, and below the holes the fallen stones littered the floor. A few had broken cracks into the benches below them.

The stone floor was laid out in unevenly-sized blocks, some of which had begun to heave up with time, and Harry decided that in another few decades roots would probably start to peek through. One, far off in a corner under the roof (where sunlight would fall in the daytime, he realised), already had. There were small clerestory windows set halfway up the slope of the roof, a vertical insert that would let in even more light without letting in rain.

Their lights made the narrow stained-glass windows flicker and seem to move; Harry recognised one or two of the religious scenes from the Betwys Beddau church, where they used to show old films in the evenings sometimes. In one of the unfamiliar ones, a man was putting his hands in another one's injuries; probaby a healing spell, he guessed. In the next window over was a woman holding, of all improbable things, what looked

like a red Easter egg.

Nick was standing about two thirds of the way down the aisle, opaque enough now that he was blocking the altar at the front of the chapel, though they could see that a rusting iron cross still hung in fragments above it.

"I'm taking a picture," Padma whispered, and the little magical flashbulb on her camera popped quietly, filling the room with light. Draco wandered down one of the benches to inspect the ceiling holes, then raced back quickly when they creaked and threatened to drop another few stones. Neville was crouching, wand held above the floor so that he could read something carved there, as Padma's flashbulb popped again.

"I didn't think they really buried people under these stones," Harry said, watching Neville trace a line of text with his finger. "I thought they were just memorials."

"I can't speak for Muggles," Nick said, his voice as hushed as theirs, "but in the wizarding world they do. Did, once. Maybe they still do." He shrugged, as if uninterested in the funerary rites of the living, and drifted a little further. "I'm over here, near the front."

Draco, who was closest, wandered over and stood carefully at the edge of the stone, inspecting it critically. Padma's camera flashed again.

"Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, 1450 - 1492. Executed by order of Henry Tudor, false pretender to the crown," Draco read, spelling out the words carefully, working his way around the odd y and spare e that made it slightly difficult to read in modern English.

Nick smiled. "I was very political even as a young ghost. I grew out of it. Notice it doesn't say beheaded," he said sadly. "No matter how much I shouted, they wouldn't put Beheaded on it when they were carving it."

"Why did he have you executed?" Harry asked, joining Draco at the gravemarker. Below Nick's name and the date of his death, there was an elaborate carving of a skeleton in profile, holding a lantern in one hand and a sickle in the other. Behind the skeleton a flat, stylised rose, like a Tudor rose simplified, spread its petals.

"Read the epitaph," Nick said quietly. It was a long one, in small, worn script, but Draco did his best.

If in politics you would muddle
Especially affairs of Muggles
Pay heed to my foul murder
At the hands of Henry Tudor.

I was a stout and loyal Yorkist
A soldier in the War of Roses
Naturally, therefore, did I own
The Duke of York should wear the crown.

Into conspiracy I entered
To kill the false Tudor pretender;
While traveling in France they caught me
Knowing that the Red Rose sought me.

On the chopping-block he placed my head;
The headsman tried to strike me dead.
Forty-seven times he tried
Before I had completely died.

Remember if you will my name;
Sir Nick may lie below in shame,
But while his body this stone lies o'er
The white rose triumphs evermore!

"Remus is from Yorkshire," Harry said, in a hushed voice. "This was about the end of the War of the Roses, wasn't it? He gave me a book on it once."

"What's the War of the Roses?" Draco asked.

"An old, very foolish war," Nick sighed. Padma's camera case clicked shut, and she came forward, Neville following. "And I was on the losing side, as it turned out."

"We should start," Padma said, taking the crowbar from Draco. "All we need is to get it a little bit apart from the others so that we can get the lifting charm underneath it."

"We know, Padma," Harry sighed, but he took Neville's crowbar and circled around to work his into the stone chink on the other side. Neville and Draco, wands ready, knelt down next to them, while Nick hovered and gave generally ineffective instructions.

Once they'd floated the heavy stone away, all four of them focusing hard in order to get it leaned up against a wall, they were faced with a smooth,

dark dirt surface, where small bugs were frantically crawling away into the cracks between the other stones.

"Who wants to dig?" Nick asked cheerfully.

"We er, have to do something first," Harry said. "You're all...preserved down there, right?"

"I should be, yes."

"We have to draw lots to see who's going to do it," Harry said.

"Why?" Nick asked, confused.

"Cos...it's a body," Padma said. "I mean. A real dead body."

"It's my body, thank you -- "

"No, but it's...I mean. Someone's going to have to reach down with the knife and, and..." Neville trailed off.

"Oh," Nick said, thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see how that might not be something you're quite used to doing."

Harry, who felt like a horrible friend for what he was about to do, took four sticks out of his pocket. There were supposed to be three short ones and a long one; instead there were four long ones.

"We'll draw by name," Harry said. "Draco, you first."

Draco had once mentioned to Harry, possibly without meaning to, that his mum had a Grave Hand on a stand in her study; it was supposed to have been the hand of a patricide, and he didn't know what it did, but his mum had paid a lot of money for it. Draco was used to strange dark magic, so much so that he thought odd when the others were wary of it; and besides, better Draco than Neville, who was nervous and likely to botch the job, or Padma, who had been the strongest opponent of even doing it in the first place.

Harry just didn't think he could do it himself. Whenever he tried imagining it, he remembered the night Peter had taken him away from Sirius and Remus and tried to kill him, and he shuddered.

No, it was best this way. Draco could do it. He held out the sticks, and Draco's hand shook a little as he drew.

"Long stick, first try," Neville said in a hushed voice, as Draco's face fell. Harry tucked the other sticks back into his pockets, snapping them in half in the process, just in case.

"All right then," Padma said. "Draco doesn't have to help with the digging charm."

Draco stepped back, and the other three began to dig, lifting balls of dirt with their wands and piling it carefully to one side. It was easier than digging with shovels, but Harry was still sore from concentrating by the end of it, when the dirt was whisked away and a plain, warped brown coffin lid looked up at them.

Neville turned away. Padma reached around and turned him back, while she carefully charmed the lid up.

Sir Nicholas looked very peaceful, really, Harry decided.

"That's me," Nick said, pleased. "I look well. I should see about a further gratuity to the heirs of the men who did the preservation-charm."

Draco came forward.

"Knife's sharp?" Padma asked. Harry took it carefully out of his bag, and offered it to Draco.

"We're mad for doing this," Draco said, holding the knife.

"It's for Nick," Padma reminded him.

"We're still mad," Draco continued, as he knelt at the edge. It wasn't quite as deep as they'd expected; he'd be able to lean over and brace himself on the coffin-lid while he...did what they'd come to do.

"Neville, hold my belt," Draco said.

"Your belt?" Neville asked, confused.

"So I don't fall in. I don't fancy landing on top of a dead body," Draco said sharply, pointing to his back, and Neville hooked his hand around the belt, gripping the nearest stone bench-arm with the other.

Draco began to talk as he eased himself out over the grave, not really babbling, but only because it was such a calm monotone.

"I guess they put a preservation spell on the coffin, too. It must be an interesting job, being a mortician for a ghost. On the one hand, you know exactly what your client would like done with the body, but I suppose perhaps sometimes the ghost and his survivors might fight a bit about it. There's a big graveyard near our house and it seems like people enjoy putting really ugly things on top of graves, don't you think? Imagine if you'd bought a tombstone for someone and they suddenly told you it was hideous and they wouldn't be caught dead with it on their grave."

Harry watched as one hand gripped the lid, testing it first to make sure it wasn't completely rotten. He didn't think Draco had even realised the pun he made. Draco's other arm began to stretch out, probing gently with the knife blade below a wide lace ruff.

"I always wanted to go look at the graveyard," Draco continued, "because I think it must be very interesting to read all the epitaphs, like Nick's, but then again I read that there are all kinds of trouble wizards can get into. In America they have these things called Haints -- "

Harry turned his head as the knife slipped forward, and saw Padma close her eyes; Neville hadn't looked at the body since they'd uncovered it.

There was a moment of absolute silence, and then a slightly...wet noise, before the thunk of a blade on wood.

"Oh my goodness!" Nick exclaimed. Harry looked up automatically, and Nearly Headless Nick's ghost floated there, now entirely headless.

"Pull me back pull me back pull me back," Draco insisted, and Neville tugged hard. The lid slammed shut as Draco flew backwards, knife skittering across the stones. He and Neville ended up in a pile, and Padma automatically bent over to haul Draco to his feet.

Harry, meanwhile, was looking down the aisle past where Nick was floating, his body ending suddenly in a fancy lace ruff.

"WELL DONE LAD!" Nick's head boomed, from where it had rolled, near the front pew. It was lying on one ear and beaming joyously. "Where's my body gone -- oh, there it is, just be a second..."

The ghostly body drifted over and, while Harry watched in horrified fascination, picked up its equally ghostly head by the hair. Harry became aware of Draco chanting "ew ew ew" in the background as he brushed off his hands and dusted himself down.

"Look!" Neville said. "It's Completely Headless Nick!"

They had pushed the dirt back into the grave and exhaustedly gotten the stone in place, though it was a little uneven; Nick didn't seem to notice, as he was still getting used to having a mobile head.

"Will it stay on?" Draco asked, as they tidied up their tools and repacked Harry's sack. Harry passed around cheese sandwiches from one of the pouches. Draco seemed to be recovering all right, though he was very, very keen on a wash, he said.

"I don't know," Nick answered, and with the air of a man balancing a book there, he put his head on top of his neck. "How do I look?"

"Bit crooked," Padma said critically. Nick opened his mouth and his head toppled forward.

"It might take some practice," he admitted, retrieving it and tucking it safely under one arm. "Oh, thank you! That was a job very well done, very well done indeed."

"Now we just have to sneak back into the castle, and even if we get caught we won't be in quite as much trouble as before," Padma said happily, as they climbed back out of the old chapel. "I want to take a picture of it from the top of the crest, so don't leave me behind, okay?"

They waited patiently while she opened her camera case and uncapped the lens; she clicked the shutter, the flashbulb popped, and --

"What was that?" Neville asked, grabbing Harry's arm. Harry had seen it too; some kind of large animal, nearby. Draco lit his wand and held it up, but it wasn't bright enough; Padma popped the flashbulb again, and this time all four of them saw it -- a horse, a deep grey horse spattered with what looked like silver paint.

"That's a unicorn," Nick said, drifting closer and holding up his head like a lantern at arm's length. The animal, clearly terrified, had stumbled when his light fell on it, and fell to its knees; as they watched, it struggled back up, and the silvery liquid pulsed down its legs.

"It's been hurt!" Draco said.

"Nobody would hurt a unicorn," Nick said to himself. "Unless -- go. Go now," he said, turning to them. "You're in danger here. Go, run and tell Hagrid someone's hunting unicorns -- "

A blast of purple light flew out of the darkness and hit Nick square, and he went pinwheeling backwards from the blow; Harry saw a tall figure in shadow against the nearly-setting moon, and another smaller shape behind him.

"Run," he whispered, shoving Neville down the path. Neville took Padma's sleeve in one hand and managed to grab a corner of Draco's coat in the other, as Harry backed slowly away, wand outstretched for all the good it would do him against a grown wizard.

Two grown wizards; one tall and thin, one shorter and limping badly, almost dragging himself along. Nick had lodged in a tree and was lost in the leaves, crying for help; all Harry saw was shadows as the men crossed the path and one of them wrenched the head of the unicorn to the ground, the taller one -- the other one bent and no he didn't just try to bite the unicorn --

The unicorn screamed and went limp, and before Harry knew it he was running as fast as he could, hearing hoofbeats in the distance and shouting now, calls of "Intruders in the forest!" and "To the path!" and what sounded like names -- Ronan, Magorian, Firenze. The bag bumped against his hips as he ran, and his breath came in short bursts; he caught up to the others only when they could actually see the road to Hogsmeade rising above them, and Draco yelped in terror when Harry passed him on one side.

They skidded to a halt on the road, panting, turning to stare at the forest.

"What happened?" Neville asked breathlessly.

"Someone killed it," Harry said, trying to keep the hysteria out of his voice. "There were two men and they went across the road and one of them bit it and it screamed..."

"You can't kill a unicorn!" Padma said. "It's a horrible curse!"

"Well they did!" Harry nearly shouted. "Do you want to go back and see for yourself?"

"I want to get out of here," Draco whimpered.

"Draco's right, they might have seen us, we should go back to the castle," Padma urged. "It's not safe here."

"Hagrid," Neville said suddenly. "Nick said we should tell Hagrid -- "

Just then they all jumped again as Nick, still vaguely purple from whatever they'd done to him, came zooming out of the forest.

"Back to Hogwarts, all of you," he said. "I'm off to find Hagrid. Now! Go!"

Unused to stern orders from the cheerful spectre, they turned and hurried up the road, Harry unshouldering his bag so that he could carry it more easily.

They woke two portraits as they ran into the main entryway, and both of them began shouting about children out of bed; Neville and Padma made for the side-stairs, while Harry shoved Draco towards the cellars and made a mad dash for the dungeons.

He ran smack into Snape, coming out of his quarters, throwing a black robe around his green pyjamas. Snape reached out and caught him before he could fall backwards, scowling deeply.

"What are you doing out of dormitories at three in the morning?" he demanded. Harry stared up at him dumbly. One of the portraits howled, and Harry found himself thrust into Snape's sitting room. "Bloody paintings," Snape muttered. "Stay there. Don't even think about moving," he ordered, and ran down the hallway. In short order the portraits fell silent, and Harry hoped the others were safer than he currently was.

Snape returned, bare feet hardly making a sound on the stone floor, and shut the door behind him.

"You look ill," he said, before Harry could speak. He went to a shelf above the fireplace and took down a bottle of thin blue liquid, pouring some into a cup. "Drink this."

Harry accepted it and stared at it for a second before sipping it. His shoulders relaxed, and he could feel his cold-numbed fingers again. Snape leaned against the wall next to the fireplace and crossed his arms.

"Out or in?" he asked. Harry blinked. "Were you sneaking out, Harry, or sneaking in? Never mind -- there's leaves on your boots. What were you doing on the grounds at this hour of the night?"

"Unicorns," Harry blurted. Snape frowned. "In the forest. There's a dead one."

"What?"

"There's a dead unicorn in the Forbidden Forest," Harry said. "Nick's gone to get Hagrid."

"You were in the forest?" Snape demanded.

"I was on a trail..." Harry said faintly.

"Why on earth -- Nick? There's no Nick in Slytherin -- "

"No, Nearly Headless Nick. Sir Nicholas. He was showing -- " Harry quickly mentally edited 'us', " -- showing me where he was buried. I thought it would be fun -- "

Snape looked furious. "Fun? You thought wandering about in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night would be fun? Is insanity genetic to your family, Harry, or did you learn it from that idiot godfather of yours?"

Harry hung his head. After a moment, Snape spoke again, sounding more controlled.

"What's this about a dead unicorn, now? If you've hurt anything in the forest -- "

"I didn't do it! There were men in the forest," Harry said quickly. "Two of them. One of them bit it and, and killed it -- "

"Bit it?"

"It was hurt and it fell down, and Nick said to run, and one of them bit it and it screamed," Harry said, trembling suddenly, eyes still on the carpet. He took another sip of the drink, but his hands still shook. He nearly jumped when he felt Snape's hands encircle his own, clenched around the glass. Snape was crouched, head ducked so that he could see Harry's face. Harry noticed, distractedly, that one of the claw-scars on his temple was a little longer than the others, and not quite as evenly spaced.

"And you saw this?" Snape asked softly. "You actually saw it happen, Harry? It's important."

Harry nodded.

"You said Nick had gone to get Hagrid?"

He nodded again.

"I should rouse the Headmaster, he'll want to know of this. Drink the rest of that and go straight to bed. Don't argue with me, Harry," Snape said, rising. "We'll discuss this further in the morning."

He was gone again, leaving Harry in the dimly-lit room, alone and feeling suddenly very small.

He sipped the drink and glanced around, hoping for something to distract him from the fact that he was probably about to be expelled from Hogwarts. His eyes lit on a clock on the wall, a dozing portrait of a hawk-faced man who looked like he was probably an ancestor of Professor Snape, and an open book on the table. He rose, mindful to take another sip of the bland blue liquid, and peered at the book. French. *De L'Emploi de la Pierre Philosophale*....Snape's handwriting on the parchment next to it read *The Uses of the Stone of Philosophers*.

The portrait snorted and woke, and Harry quickly gulped the rest of the potion and picked up his bag, fleeing the sitting room for the sanctuary of his dormitory. Snake, who was hibernating most of the time now, didn't even open an eye when he stuffed the bag under his bed, pulled off his clothing and reached for his favourite pyjama shirt, the one that was a hand-me-down from Sirius which said *Phoenikoi Do It Over and Over* in faded letters on the front. He slid into bed and lay there, trembling a little -- though not as much, now that the potion was hitting his stomach -- and wrapped the blankets tight around him.

He strained his ears to make out anything, but even if there had been noises in the forest he wouldn't have been able to hear them from here. He didn't think he could sleep, but the warmth from the potion was spreading to his fingertips and toes, and he felt his eyelids droop; perhaps Professor Snape had given him something to -- he yawned widely -- put him to sleep....

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 14

"What do you suppose really happened?"

Severus Snape blew on his tea gently, to cool it, and took a sip; he had learned early on in his career at Hogwarts that the Deputy Headmistress liked a good strong brew, and it was best to sip slowly or risk overwhelmed tastebuds. He set the teacup down on the small table in the Professors' Common Room, and shook his head.

"A unicorn is dead; Hagrid says the centaurs won't speak of it, though I don't doubt his hamfisted method of interrogation has something to do with it," he replied. "They're certain something's been drinking its blood. I suspect werewolves," he added, with a nasty look. McGonagall ignored it.

"Oh, that I knew; Headmaster Dumbledore spoke with me this morning while you were meting out Harry's punishment. I meant to ask what Harry was really doing in the forest."

Snape shook his head. "I doubt he will ever say, even to his godfather," he said slowly. "I'm nearly certain he's covering up for something. Very likely his friends were along, though there's no way of proving it. Well, there is," he added, aggrieved, "but I've been forbidden from attempting it on Longbottom, and Malfoy and the Patil girl would prove surprisingly stubborn, I suspect."

"You cannot go about practicing legilimency on the children," McGonagall scolded sharply. "You know you signed the agreement when you began teaching here, Severus. If Albus finds you've been doing anything of the sort -- "

"Legilimency on children?" Snape snorted. "It's hardly difficult to tell what they're thinking without it. I remember my pledge, thank you very much. I was intending merely to shout them into fearful submission."

McGonagall looked mollified, but not by much. "I won't have you terrifying the children either; they've had enough of that this year already," she said firmly. "Although..."

Minerva looked troubled, something she never showed the students, though in the sanctuary of the common room it wasn't all that rare. "I know Sir Nicholas said his head was knocked off by that blast he took, but I still wonder...he is so transparent sometimes..."

"What, you think the children went off to do an incredibly advanced charm on him in the Forest in the middle of the night? With Longbottom along?" Snape gave her a rare smile of amusement over his tea. "No, depend upon it, they were up to some mischief and probably saw Nick going into the forest. A shame Harry won't tell the truth; it's a depressingly Gryffindor quality, covering for one's friends."

"And lying is a distinctly Slytherin one," she shot back.

"I wouldn't be so sure. I know for a fact that the Malfoy boy saves Longbottom from his Potions homework and lies about it."

"He wouldn't need saving if you wouldn't frighten them so."

"Fear is an effective motivator," Snape replied, then winced as he leaned forward too fast. He hadn't had much sleep after Harry's arrival in his quarters at three in the morning, and his head had begun to ache, the right temple throbbing. He was glad there were no classes today, and he could return to his quarters as soon as he'd had his tea.

"Have you had that looked at?" she asked with concern, looking up at him from where she was marking papers.

"Madam Pomfrey provided me with an effective painkiller for tonight. I don't keep such things in my quarters," he replied.

"You can call her Poppy, you know, Severus."

"Indeed, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall."

She laid her quill down. "Soon you're going to have to come to grips with the idea that you aren't junior faculty anymore. Poppy likes you; she wishes you wouldn't be so formal, I've heard her say so. You call Pomona Sprout by her first name."

"We work together far too often in the greenhouses; when one is likely to be devoured by raging ragweed at any moment, formality seems ridiculous."

"Is that the reason?" McGonagall asked, with a smile. "Speaking of Pomona, she says you've been asking after Draco Malfoy. Any particular reason?"

"No."

She lifted an eyebrow. He returned the gesture.

"It has come to the attention of some of the other professors that Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter keep strange company," she said, returning to her

grading. "They find it unnerving to see the Houses mixing so easily."

Severus had to admit that his fellow teachers had a point; Gryffindors and Slytherin had always been a step removed from each other, and Ravenclaw normally disdained them both, and all of them ignored Hufflepuff. To see shy, fox-faced Malfoy and scruffy Neville Longbottom flanking Padma Patil, taller than both of them -- to see Harry smile easily and tame a vicious-minded fellow Slytherin with a brief remark, a touch on the shoulder....

Severus knew that Harry was changing the order of things, in subtle ways that they could already see would cause much larger results, years down the line. The Houses wouldn't necessarily alter overnight, but the little knot of interhouse friends had stood firm against all comers so far.

"I'm not sure I like this...intermingling," he admitted, slowly. She nodded.

"Is that your good sense, Severus, or your upbringing showing?"

"A child who wishes to achieve great things must not have others hanging about him like dead weights," he said, rubbing the ache that seemed to lodge under the skin of his temple. "Slytherin has always prided itself on its independence."

"And this hypothetical child you've posited wouldn't happen to have black hair and green eyes?" she asked. "You don't think the other children, Draco and Neville and Padma are...hanging about him? Perhaps acting a bit like dead weights?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "If the Houses are going to mix with each other in common daily interaction, I don't see why we even have them at all. The whole point of sorting the children is to put them in an environment where they will flourish. I don't see how Neville Longbottom spending every evening studying with Harry is going to cultivate either boy into the man he ought to be. Harry is practically an outcast in his own House already; he may be respected, but they aren't his friends."

"I have heard," McGonagall murmured, "That the usual...shall we say, youthful rhetoric about purebloodedness has come to a stop. Harry having a Muggleborn mother, and pureblood friends in other Houses."

"I hadn't noticed," Snape answered. "Although I imagine there will be some rather surprised parents, this holiday."

McGonagall smiled, and stirred her tea. "And what punishment have you prescribed for Mr. Potter, for being out wandering the grounds in the dead of night?"

"I gave him some extra reading," Snape said, a little too casually.

"Extra reading? To Harry Potter? Isn't that rather like giving him a bar of chocolate and telling him his punishment is to eat the whole thing?"

"It's boring reading," he protested. "And it's things he ought to know."

"Such as?"

Snape looked resolutely poker-faced. She sighed.

"You're not professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts," she scolded. "If Quirrell finds out that you've been giving students Dark Arts reading --"

"Do you suppose he'll stutter at me?" Snape asked cruelly. "I should think I can handle him."

"Handle whom?" Albus Dumbledore asked, appearing in the doorway. "You're not going to be starting any fistfights in the halls, I hope, Severus."

"No, Headmaster," Snape said, ducking his head.

"Splendid. Oh look, there's Denbigh with the sandwiches. Shall we?"

"Are you sure we shouldn't let them ride down with their classmates?" Remus asked, as he stowed the overnight bag in the little cupboard near the bed. "That was always a lot of fun when we were at school."

"Harry said he'd rather ride with us," Sirius answered. "Andromeda feels better knowing Neville and Draco are going to be looked after, and it'll annoy Narcissa if she finds out."

Remus remembered the letter, and grinned. Narcissa's reply to Andromeda had said very elegantly and at the same time rather bluntly that if they wanted to look after another loud, messy eleven-year-old over the holidays it was their funeral, but to please keep him away from Bad Influences. It wasn't hard to translate that Bad Influences was code for Sirius Black.

"It'll be fun, like a day out with the boys. We'll wake up in Hogsmeade just in time to buy them some breakfast before the ride home," Sirius continued, throwing himself down on the bed in their small sleeper-compartment, and Remus agreed that he was eager to see Harry again, eager enough to spend the night on the train in order to see him a few hours sooner. They were catching the ten-pm wizarding train out of King's Cross, and would arrive in Hogsmeade as the Hogwarts Express to London was departing. They could feed the boys in Hogsmeade and then catch the

ten-fifteen back to London. The holiday would begin, for Harry and his friends, barely a few hours later than for the other children.

Unlike Muggle transport, the bed they'd reserved was remarkably comfortable; by the time dark had well and truly fallen, Remus had settled into it and was staring out the small window above, watching trees and the occasional hill go past. Sirius, sprawled on his side with his arm flung over Remus' chest, nosed a little at his shoulder.

"Should have gone as Padfoot, could have paid a little less," he said.

"We can afford to pay a full-price train ticket, thank Merlin," Remus answered.

"That's not the point. The point is pulling a fast one on the authorities," Sirius answered.

"We are not," Remus replied, broken by a yawn, "seventeen anymore."

"Yes. Our mischief should therefore get exponentially worse with each passing year."

"Shouldn't we be high-stakes jewel thieves by now, in that case?"

"There's still time."

Remus laughed and fell silent, looking out through the window and wondering if he'd be able to see the Dog Star at any point in their trip.

"It has a rhythm, doesn't it?" Sirius said, fingers curled lightly on Remus' chest, over his heart. "The train, I mean. It's predictable."

"I suppose so."

"Is it strange that I half-want to ride through Hogsmeade and not stop?" Sirius asked.

"What, you mean go straight to Hogwarts? The train doesn't -- "

"No. Go away from Hogwarts."

Remus pushed himself up on one elbow, looking down in confusion. "But -- "

"No, I know, it's ridiculous." Sirius rolled away from him, a little, staring at the ceiling. "It's just...what if he's different?"

"Different? You don't suppose he's shaved his head and has a tattoo, do you?" Remus teased lightly.

"I was fifteen when I did that and I had a very good excuse."

"Being fifteen is almost an excuse in and of itself."

"He's a wizard now. He plays Quidditch on the House team. He has his own friends; it's not like the village boys, either, these are proper wizarding friends."

Remus eased himself down again, slowly. "You're worried he's going to come home and hate you."

"It happened with my parents. I remember it. Being a Gryffindor changed me. I didn't fit in the family anymore. A whole family of Slytherins and I was a Gryffindor."

"That early?"

"That early. I knew. I knew I wasn't part of the family anymore."

"You never said."

"What was there to say?" Sirius buried his face in Remus' neck, breath warm against his skin. "I don't want Harry to hate me because he doesn't fit."

"Harry doesn't hate you. Your family was -- "

" -- awful."

" -- awful, yes, but also intolerant. They didn't love you for being yourself, only for being an heir and a marriageable son."

Sirius snorted. "Showed them, didn't I."

"I think perhaps living in homosexual sin with a werewolf could be considered 'showing them', yes." Remus smiled. "He's still our Harry. That doesn't change."

Sirius was silent again, and Remus almost thought he'd gone to sleep when he asked, "Moony?"

"Mm, what is it?"

"Ever had sex on a train?"

Remus burst out laughing.

Andromeda and Ted met them at the station on the return journey, with hugs for the reluctant, self-conscious boys and the promise of a hot dinner waiting at home. Neville, after being hugged smotheringly for the fourth time, announced that they had better go home before Andromeda started in on Harry and Draco, to which Harry replied that Ted was doing a pretty good job, and Draco had better run for cover.

Draco looked quite shocked when Ted released Harry and gave him a second welcoming hug, touseling his fine blond hair. Harry grinned and gave Draco a wink.

"Remember what we talked about," Neville said to Harry, over dinner. Nearby, Draco scowled and flattened what remained of his peas with his fork.

"It's none of our business," he whispered.

"It is our business! Someone's killing unicorns and tried to kill Harry and I bet you anything it's because of that stone Harry talked about -- "

"What are you three plotting over there?" Andromeda asked, as she spooned more potatoes onto Remus' plate, much to his dismay. Neville elbowed Harry.

"Er," Harry said. "Well, we've...Neville and Draco and me...we have work to do over the holidays."

"Homework?" Dora asked, looking up. "On holiday?"

"Just a little," Harry said. "Neville says Andromeda's put all the books from the old library in the back storage room downstairs. We thought we could look around."

"Draco's got loads of work from McGonagall," Neville said. "And Snape's set me two feet of research to do to make up for exploding his last spare cauldron."

"Perhaps we ought to buy you a few extras for when you go back," Ted said thoughtfully.

"What about you, Harry? Professor Sinistra still pumping you for information about me?" Sirius asked, with a sly grin at Remus.

"I have extra Potions too," Harry said. "Professor Snape said I...could get an early start on spring classes if I did some reading he gave me."

"How kind," Sirius muttered.

"We like Professor Snape," Andromeda answered him, meaningfully. Harry knew that Andromeda and Ted had Professor Snape to dinner, sometimes; he also knew that they always carefully arranged it for nights Sirius was going to be out.

"You were saying, Harry," Remus reminded him. "About the spare books in the storage room."

"We were wondering if we could use them for research," Harry said. "I overheard Professor McGonagall say that the Black family library was the best in England..."

Sirius looked at once proud and put out by this, since saying the Black Family Anything was 'the best' bothered him, as the Last of the Blacks and - this always made Remus groan -- the Black Sheep.

"I don't see why you shouldn't, all the books in the storage room are harmless enough as long as you're careful," Andromeda answered. "Anything in particular we could help with?"

"No, thank you," Draco answered politely. Andromeda smiled a little to herself.

"Thought we might take you lot Christmas shopping tomorrow," Sirius said, refilling his wine glass. "Have a bit of a lie-in, late breakfast, Remus says he'll show you the back-room of Madam Schaeffer's if you like."

"That sounds fun," Harry said. "The Remembrall still works," he added. "Neville never forgets his tie anymore, do you?"

Neville blushed and muttered "thank you, Sirius," shyly but happily. Andromeda patted his hand approvingly.

They're testing it now against Ministry of Magic standards," Sirius said. "By April or May they should have permission to produce them on a large scale, and your godfather," he said, turning to Harry, "Is going to make enough money to retire young."

"Such an active life you lead now," Andromeda teased.

"I didn't say I was going to be the one retiring," Sirius grinned. Remus mashed up his potatoes.

"I like working," he said.

"Buy you a bookshop then. That's like work, only not, cos real second-hand bookshops -- "

"-- never sell anything," Remus and Harry both said in unison. Draco and Neville stared at them.

"Old joke," Harry said, suddenly rather embarrassed. "Pass the water jug?"

"I've got it," Dora said, but as she picked up the glass jug, her fingers slipped on the handle and it wobbled out of her grip. She made a good attempt to catch it, but in doing so knocked it sideways. It clattered over, spraying water as it went, and ended by landing on Remus' plate, flooding it and drenching him from nose to knees in freezing water. He gasped, blinking water out of his eyes.

"Oh -- Remus -- " Dora gasped, righting the water jug and flinging a last splash onto his lap. "I'm sorry, here, I'll -- "

"No!" Sirius, Ted, Andromeda, and Remus all said in unison. Dora, reaching for her wand, looked only slightly wounded.

Draco tensed immediately; in the Malfoy household that kind of behaviour would get you locked up for the day in your room, or force you to fry your nose if you were a house-elf. He waited for the roar of reprimand that was sure to come from Remus and the shouting...but it never came. Instead, Harry and Neville began to giggle uncontrollably. Sirius chuckled, then joined in the laughter at the same time Ted and Andromeda did. Dora smiled sheepishly, and even Remus was grinning as he brushed ineffectually at the water all over his shirt and slicked his hair back with wet hands.

"I'll get a towel," Dora said briskly, rising from her chair, but Remus stood faster, and caught her attention.

"First," he said quietly, "I have to do this."

"What?" Dora asked. Remus lunged forward and Draco braced for it -- here it came, the laughter was just nervous anxiety --

"Rrrrawr!" Remus roared, and tackled the young Auror in a freezing, wet hug. She squawked as he bowled her over, and when he helped her off the floor she was nearly as damp as himself. Everyone was laughing, now, and Draco hesitantly joined in.

Dora scrambled out of the room, apparently to look for towels, and Remus dropped back into his seat, squelching a bit.

"Honestly, Remus, you're as bad as Sirius and the children," Andromeda scolded. "Imagine, manhandling Dora that way."

"Yes, what are your motives towards my daughter?" Ted grinned.

"Nothing but honourable affection," Remus replied. "Harry's said on more than one occasion that he's going to marry her, though."

Harry turned red, and Remus picked up the water jug. "Here, Harry, have some water..."

Four or five feeble drops spilled out into Harry's glass, and everyone started laughing again.

Well, Draco thought, it seemed to be a very...informal sort of household.

Andromeda, being a tidy sort of person, had gone through the Black library and sorted out the useless from the useful and the damaged from the whole. The books which hadn't been sold or (and here Harry, having inherited Remus' love of books for books' sake, winced) thrown out, were arranged neatly on the old library's shelves in a large storage space that had once been Jupiter Black's study. There was a carton in the corner marked "Sirius" which Andromeda had said they were not to look into on pain of a hexing, but otherwise nothing was forbidden.

"Andromeda never let me come in here alone before," Neville said, holding up a candle to the nearest row of books. "She said they're all harmless, but if I tried any of them without a wand I could get into trouble."

"None of these are Dark Arts books, though," Harry said, a little disappointedly. "She must have gotten rid of them."

"Reckon so," Neville agreed. "All right, where do we start?"

"Books about philosophers?" Harry suggested. "The book on Professor Snape's desk was about the Philosopher's Stone, and I heard him...mention it once," he added lamely.

"I don't see why they'd get a whacking great three-headed dog to guard a rock," Draco muttered. "Why don't we just ask someone?"

"Because that would let on that we know," Harry said patiently, "and we don't know who to trust. Professor Snape'd throw an awful fit if he found out I'd been spying on his work. I'll look for books about philosophers and Neville can look for books about rocks, and Draco, you look for books about unicorns."

"Unicorns?" Draco asked. "Why'm I stuck with books about pansy unicorns?"

"I want to know why anyone'd want to bite one," Harry said firmly. "Off you go then. I wonder what happened to the comic books Sirius hid in the window-seat."

"Andromeda gave 'em to me," Neville said, as he wandered down the rows. "Do you think he wants them back?"

"Doubt it. Can I borrow some?" Harry asked.

"Sure. I like Rupert the Vampire Slayer the best," Neville called. "It's got all the most interesting murders in it. They still print it -- Dora buys it for me sometimes. She likes William the Bloody better though."

They lapsed into silence as they searched, only making triumphant noises when they found something that looked useful, or calling out to one another to ask opinions.

"I've found mine," Draco said smugly. "Listen to this. The horns and tail hairs of unicorns are used in many different potions and are popular wand-cores in Great Britain. Horns and hair are harvested only from unicorns which have died or shed naturally."

"What's that got to do with biting one?" Neville asked.

"I don't think it was biting, wait till I'm done. The blood of a unicorn is silver and is only used in the darkest of spellcasting or as a cure for those near death. However, killing a unicorn is considered by the Magical community to be a monstrous act which calls down a curse upon the murderer. The blood may preserve the killer, but the price is believed to be a cursed half-life of the spirit."

"Someone was drinking its blood, not biting it," Harry said in a hushed voice. "Someone who was going to die if they didn't."

"I'm never going in that rotten forest again," Neville announced, "Not for love or Galleons."

Just then Draco gave a startled exclamation. "Have you seen this thing back here?"

"What is it?" Harry asked, leaning around a shelf. "Where are you?"

"All the way in the back -- " Draco was interrupted by the crash of some boxes, " -- ow. There's some huge thing on the wall back here."

"Urgh, squash it," Neville said.

"No, it's not a bug, it's a tapestry," Draco said scornfully, as Harry approached. "We have 'em all over at home. Hold up your light, Neville."

"The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, Toujours Pur," Harry read. "What's it doing way in the back here?"

"Andromeda probably didn't want to throw it away," Neville said. "I bet it goes back to the Founders, almost."

"There's Phineas Nigellus," Harry said.

"Who?" Neville and Draco asked.

"Most unpopular headmaster at Hogwarts," Harry sighed. "Listen, I didn't have very many books about wizards at home, I had to make do with what I had and Hogwarts, A History is really quite worth reading -- "

"Andromeda's not on here," Neville said. "Look, neither is Sirius, there's burnt patches where they belong."

"There's Regulus though," Harry said. "He was killed, Remus told me. Sirius doesn't talk about him."

"It must be enchanted -- look, Draco, there's you!"

"Me?" Draco demanded, leaning closer. Sure enough, one of the only names at the very bottom of the tapestry read Draco Black Pur Malfoy.

"Look, there's my father, and there's the bit where Aunt Andromeda would go if she hadn't been burned out."

"And there's Bellatrix," Harry said quietly. Neville let out a quiet whine of fear. "It must be charmed, I bet nobody's touched it since Sirius' mum died, but it's been kept up."

"There's only me and two others on our line," Draco said.

"Aren't very many purebloods left," Harry shrugged. "Remus said it's down to breeding."

Draco stuck out his jaw. "What your godfather's valet says about my family -- "

"It's my family too, and he's not his valet, so there," Harry retorted. "Sirius has been my dad for longer than my real dad got to be, and Remus too. I didn't say anything about your family, at least nothing worse than you've said."

"Lads, are you done down here yet? There's snow on the ground in Diagon Alley -- "

Sirius' voice drifted down the stacks, growing louder as he neared the last shelf. When he saw what they were standing in front of, his face went blank.

"Come away from that," he said. "At once."

Harry and Neville hurried forward, out into the long aisle; Draco gave his father's name -- and Sirius' burnt-out one -- a last backwards glance before he followed. Sirius reached out a hand to draw Draco away from it, and the pale-haired boy gave him a startled look.

"There's no good in studying things like that," Sirius said, voice cold -- though Harry suspected it was suppressed fear rather than anger at the boys. "Some history is better forgotten."

There was a silence, then, and Harry felt Sirius' hand on his head, pulling him close for an instant before he drew a deep breath and said, in a falsely cheerful voice, "Come along then, there's snow in Diagon Alley and Florian Fortescue's having a snowman-making contest. Winners get free hot chocolate."

Harry noticed, as they left, that Sirius locked the door behind them.

They didn't venture back into the storage room before the holiday was over; every time one of them would suggest it, the other two would sit silently for a while before agreeing that it wasn't worth annoying Sirius over.

Still, despite their curiosity, they enjoyed their holiday; there were innumerable shopping trips with Andromeda, cooking things that almost never came out the way they ought to with Ted, and streetcorner singing with Dora -- who now had the benefit of three small boys who could set their caps out, instead of just one. The day Sirius came along, he got six times as many coins in his cap as everyone else combined, and Remus sulked for two days about all the floo contact numbers he got with them.

There were also adventures in Muggle London with Remus and Sirius; Draco, who had never set foot inside a Muggle shop, stayed close by his cousin Sirius, but then he tended to do that anyway. Andromeda confided to Sirius a few days before Christmas that it looked like he'd picked up a pale shadow.

Christmas morning, Harry woke first, and bounded into the other bedroom in their flat, landing on Sirius' stomach and nearly knocking them both off the bed. Remus moaned and hid under a pillow, but Sirius, after a moment or two of sleepy confusion, roared about young boys whose presents could still be transfigured into coal, and joined Harry in a race downstairs to see who could get to Neville and Draco's room first. On the way they woke up Andromeda and Ted, who stumbled out of bed just in time to blame Remus for it as he came down the stairs.

Ted disappeared into the kitchen briefly to make tea, while the boys shook their wrapped gifts and Andromeda fetched Dora from her flat through the floo portal; Remus went back to sleep on Sirius' shoulder while Neville opened his first gift from Ted, a box with hidden compartments in it for games and things. Harry's first gift turned out to be magical drawing pencils, self-sharpening and guaranteed never to break. Draco, surprised at the oversized pile of gifts with his name on them -- wrapped in sparkling yellow paper, like Harry's green and Neville's red -- discovered a bone tie-pin in the shape of a badger's head and a magical, flame-illuminated booklight that would stick to anything he pressed it against.

The boys were far too busy showing off their gifts to each other, by the time the adults got around to opening theirs, to pay much attention; besides, it was all silly things like umbrellas and scarves and, in Dora's case, a necklace charmed to look like a lizard's tail, perfect for wearing out on her nights off.

It was undoubtedly a good thing that they didn't notice some of the gifts. When Remus opened the package wrapped in expensive but plain cream paper and peered inside, he blushed immediately and closed the box back up again, trying not to choke at Sirius' whispered suggestion that he practice his painting skills with caramel, and preferably a three-dimensional canvas.

"Be good during dinner," Remus murmured, "and you might be lucky enough to model."

"Draco, you look lost in that thing," Ted called, across Harry and Neville's excited chattering over a self-propelling kite kit that Harry was trying to assemble. "All right there, lad?"

Draco looked up and smiled happily; the jumper he was wearing was a size too big, but he'd assured Dora that he liked it and would grow into it.

"There's a lot of presents," he answered. "Mum even sent me a book, and some shoes." He held up a book entitled A Young Wizard's Guide To Etiquette. Sirius snorted with laughter. "Do you think Mum got her present in time?"

"I'm sure she did, and in the meanwhile thank goodness for indulgent aunts. Shoes indeed," Ted said. "Bring that Muggle toy here and let's see it, I

used to play with this kind of thing all the time when I was a kid."

Draco obediently rose and began showing off his new box of "Legos" to Ted and Sirius, who was intrigued by what precisely Muggles were on about, playing with little bricks that snapped together. Draco seemed to like the squarish, cylinder-headed little people especially.

When Sirius leaned back so that Harry could join in the fun, Andromeda bent over the back of the couch and whispered in his ear, "Did Remus talk to you about dinner?"

Sirius groaned. "Yes, he told me about dinner, I promise to behave."

"You promise, Sirius? Because if the two of you ruin Christmas dinner over some silly fight that should have ended ages ago -- "

"I'll keep to my side of the table if he keeps to his," Sirius said sullenly. "Though I don't see why we have to spoil the whole dinner by inviting some cranky, irritable -- "

"Severus is my friend, Sirius, and he's a friend of our family. I've tried to make allowances for the little feud you two have kept going, Merlin knows why, but he hasn't got very many friends and I won't see him be alone on Christmas."

Sirius gave her a defiant look, but kept quiet; Andromeda was, after all, the de facto matriarch of the Black clan, and Remus had offered him a tempting bribe if he was good.

Once the boys had shown off all their new things and they'd cleared away the remnants of the wrapping paper, they bundled up and ventured outside for brunch in Sosi Alley; it was a clear, crisp day, and Dora ran ahead with Neville and Harry, singing carols and annoying those who had hoped for a Christmas lie-in. Draco hung back a bit, content to walk between Sirius and Andromeda and occasionally take out the compass Sirius had given him, which, rather than pointing North like Muggle compasses, pointed in the direction of wherever he wanted to go so long as he knew where the place was.

Andromeda exchanged a grin over his head with Sirius, right before Dora threw a snowball that nearly knocked Sirius off his feet with surprise, and the tranquil family moment was broken up by an epic snowball fight the likes of which Diagon Alley would never see again.

Severus Snape was not, normally, given to shyness; then again, he was not usually placed in situations where he didn't know the people present, or couldn't intimidate them. Andromeda and Ted, however, were his friends and had utterly refused to be intimidated by him; hence, he was still, after two years, slightly...skittish, whenever he arrived at their house. All the more so because the children would be there, and so would Sirius Black.

He had promised Andromeda he wouldn't needle Black, though it was ridiculously easy to do so; she'd promised the man would behave himself, and while Lupin would also be there, normally if left alone he was harmless enough.

Still, he tightened his grip on the packages he carried -- a bottle of wine in one hand and a small wooden box with airholes drilled in the top in the other -- and stepped out of the floo, into the warm living room of the Tonks household.

"Severus!" Andromeda called, from the kitchen doorway. "Prompt as usual."

"Andromeda," he said, coming forward and allowing her to accept the wine and kiss his cheek. "I trust you've had a good Christmas."

"It was wonderful. How is everyone at Hogwarts?"

"Well, so far as I'm aware." He presented her with the wooden box, and she laughed.

"Thank you for doing that. You know I'm hopeless when it comes to animals. Come into the dining room, we're just setting the table."

He followed her dutifully into a room filled with noise, crashing, and children, as well as most of his living enemies.

"Severus," Remus said politely, holding out a hand. He shook it, reluctantly, then shared a mutually malevolent glare with Sirius before turning to the children.

"Look, Neville, Severus brought you your last present," Andromeda said. "We asked him to pick it out for you. Go on, open it."

Harry grinned and gave his Professor a little wave; Draco and Neville were peering interestedly at the box, trying to figure out how to unlatch it. Finally Neville pulled out the latchpin and lifted the lid.

"GROSS!" said Draco delightedly.

"What is it?" Sirius asked.

"S'a toad!" Neville squeaked, lifting it out carefully. One leg kicked rebelliously until he collected it up into his hand. "Ooooh."

"Now he won't be constantly asking to play with Snake," Harry teased.

"All right, who wants -- haven't you lot finished setting the table yet?" Ted sighed, as he appeared in the doorway. Hovering behind him was a basket of rolls and a large dish of cranberry sauce.

"Neville got a toad!" Harry exclaimed.

"Yes! Well done Severus, he looks very healthy. Put him back in the box, Neville, we're about to eat," Ted said briskly. "Dora, the goose?"

Everyone, Snape included, looked anxious about this, but Nymphadora solved the problem by floating the platter through the doorway, without moving from the spot she was in.

"Er," Snape said, as they were seating themselves. "I was also given parcels for Harry and Draco, from the house-elves."

"The house-elves?" Andromeda asked curiously.

"Yes," Snape said drily. He produced a small, crumpled-looking package from his trouser pocket, and a rather larger one from the pocket of his discarded cloak.

"To Harry, From a Friend, do not open until alone," Harry read aloud, off the tag of the larger one.

"It's been checked for hexes," Snape muttered.

"That was good of you," Andromeda said, smiling indulgently at Ted as he carved the goose.

"Who's that one from?" Harry asked Draco, laughing as he slid his own package under his chair for safekeeping. "It certainly looks like it's been wrapped by a house elf!"

Draco looked for a tag, but finding nothing, tore the paper -- which was glued shut, rather than spelled or taped somehow. He took out the crumpled object inside, and unfolded it carefully.

"It's a hat!" Neville exclaimed.

"Made out of socks," Dora added, staring at it.

"Full of marzipan!" Draco squeaked, removing a smaller package from inside the hat.

"Look, with little..." Harry leaned over and examined the small embroidered figures dancing around the edge of the hat, which did appear to be made out of sock-shapes.

"Dancing...house-elves..." Draco said.

"It's hideous," Snape observed.

"But in a stunning sort of way," Dora added.

"Look, you can tell who they are," Draco said. "That's Mendy and Dobby and there's Denbigh and Merion and Radnor in the muffler he made out of butcher's twine..."

"Goose!" Ted said, effectively ending the conversation. Draco, looking rather secretly pleased, slipped the hat onto his head and proudly ate his entire dinner in the company of a string of tiny dancing house-elves.

"Hummm," Sirius Black, heir to the Black fortunes and last son of the name, flopped backwards onto the scarlet quilt on the bed he shared with Remus and threw his arms over his head. "Long day."

"Indeed," Remus said, from the dresser, where he was undoing the buttons on his shirt. "Would have been shorter if you and Harry didn't have us all awake at seven in the morning."

"I think seven in the morning shows admirable restraint. When he was younger it used to be five."

"Good God, I remember that Christmas, but only through a haze of sleep deprivation and repeated demands for tea," Remus said, chuckling. He folded his shirt and tossed it into the laundry basket, while Sirius, already in his boxers, laughed in agreement.

"I think you also, speaking of admirable restraint, were very good at dinner tonight," Remus continued. "And I must say it was almost good to see Severus again."

"You're lying."

"No; he's been good to Harry, and we were quite rotten to him, you know, when we were children."

"He was rotten to us."

"Yes, but we were stronger than he was. Unfair advantage," Remus admonished, hanging up his belt on the little rack near his chair. The other chair, by dint of being the one Padfoot liked to shed on, was Sirius'. "That's not the point, anyhow."

"And what is the point, Professor Lupin?"

Remus laughed. "The point," he said, "is that you were very good this evening, and I have a reward for you."

"I like the sound of that," Sirius said, warm from the after-dinner wine and lazy from an evening spent minding three eleven-year-old boys.

"Close your eyes, then," Remus answered, and Sirius obediently shut his eyes. There was a soft noise, like the scrape of metal on glass -- oh lord, the lid of the caramel body-paint he'd bought for Remus' Christmas present -- and then something touched his lips. A finger smeared thick caramel across them, then a hand caught his chin when he automatically opened his mouth to lick it away.

"No, Pads," Remus said softly in his ear, and he felt trouser-clad legs straddle his hips. He closed his mouth obediently. "This part's mine."

Remus sucked on his lower lip, tongue skating along it, cleaning the sweet syrup away before deepening the kiss. Sirius tasted it only as an afterthought in Remus' mouth, hungrily. He brought his hands up to twine in the hair a shade darker than the caramel -- it had caught his eye because it was nearly the colour of Remus' hair -- but the other man tsked and pulled away.

"You're not supposed to move," he whispered, but when Sirius obediently laid his hands back above his head, Remus caught his left hand, and picked up the small brush that had come with the pot of caramel.

Sirius moaned as Remus painted a line down his index finger, carefully, and then turned the hand over, drawing a small circle in the centre of his palm before licking it all away.

"Barely get a taste of it that way," Remus murmured against his palm, shifting his hips a little; Sirius could feel his erection, a tight hardness in the trousers that were rough on his suddenly sensitive skin.

"Don't I taste good enough?" Sirius asked laughingly, and Remus spread another layer of caramel on his lower lip to silence him. This time he didn't even try to lick it off before it was kissed away, and then there were other warm, wet kisses down his throat.

"Here we are," Remus murmured, at the edge of a hollow where the clavicles met, just below the dog collar Sirius never took off. Once it had been habit; now, it was a promise of sorts. Remus liked it. A lot.

Remus dipped the brush again and drizzled the caramel lightly, lapping it up with long, slow strokes of his tongue.

"Moony -- "

"Shh," Remus admonished, kissing him again. The taste was stronger now, sweet with a hint of sharpness, like Remus -- dangerous under his harmless appearance. "You were so good at dinner," he said, as the brush moved over the shape of his animagus tattoo, "It'd be awful to have to stop with your reward now."

"Mm, don't stop," Sirius wriggled a little, and Remus, leaning over to put the brush back, moaned.

"Mischevious dog," he said, starting at the bottom of the tattoo and kissing his way upwards. When he reached the crossbars he went beyond them, nibbling gently on first one nipple, then the other, while Sirius writhed underneath him and tried to stay silent.

"I think," Remus added, his warmth vanishing for a moment, "this is quite -- " Sirius did moan as his boxers were removed and cast aside, " -- the best Christmas present I've ever unwrapped."

Sirius laughed, then gasped when he felt the brush tickle his inner thigh -- no caramel on it, this time, just a caress followed by the warm slide of a hand, holding him gently to the bed. He opened his eyes and saw Remus, tousel-haired, now quite naked, and licking his lips. The sight very nearly undid him.

"You'll never get your present," Remus continued, "If you don't close your eyes."

Sirius closed his eyes again, then felt them nearly roll up in his head when Remus put one hand on his hip and used the thumb of his other hand to smear caramel across the tip of his cock, around the head and down the sensitive vein on the underside. He was almost ready for the tongue that licked it up, in even swipes that made his skin tingle and his blood pound, but the light, gentle scrape of teeth caught him by surprise.

"Sweet," Remus murmured, pulling back a little so that the words vibrated against his cock. Fingers brushed against him again, and this time instead of licking up the caramel they left behind, Remus slipped his lips around him and sucked gently, and Sirius reached for him, cupping the back of his head, running fingers through his caramel-brown hair. Remus didn't notice, or if he did the time for reprimands was over; instead he sucked a little again, head bobbing gently, tongue working slowly. Sirius bucked and gasped and tried to be quiet but when Remus hummed a little

He broke and came, moaning loudly.

He felt warm weight move up his body, and then that mouth on his again, tasting of himself and caramel.

"You taste sweet," Remus whispered, when the kiss ended. He nuzzled his cheek a little, and then added, "But if you're that loud again we'll wake Harry."

"Good education for the boy," Sirius mumbled happily.

"Traumatise him," Remus answered. Sirius, feeling hard heat against his hip, drew up one leg invitingly, but Remus took his hand and twined their fingers together instead, wrapping them around himself and stroking lightly. Sirius took the hint and tightened his fingers just slightly, and Remus made a pleased noise deep in his throat that Sirius only ever heard when they were in bed together, and even then --

Well, he'd done a lot in order to hear that noise, over the past two years.

"Lovely reward," he murmured, as Remus moaned and made the noise again. "I'm glad you enjoyed your present."

"Mmm...yes...."

"Easy now. Like that?"

"Sirius -- " Remus let out a much quieter, sharper cry than Sirius' moan, and his hips bucked forward and he came while Sirius murmured nonsense in his ear, reassuring and pleased, voice low. After a moment he reached for his wand to clean them up, and Remus curled close.

"Such a good dog," he yawned, nuzzling the collar at Sirius' throat. Sirius drifted a hand up to smooth his hair against his temple, and rolled the edges of the quilt over them, wrapping his other arm around Remus in the process.

"Your dog," he answered, and Remus smiled against his skin as he drifted off.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 15

That evening, the adults (minus Professor Snape, who said he had to at least put in an appearance at the Hogwarts Christmas dinner) talked and drank wine around the fire. The boys played with their gifts for a while, until Harry whispered something to Neville and Draco, and they snuck away upstairs to his room. After he'd closed the door, Harry took out the package Snape had given him earlier.

"I thought it said you should open it when you were alone," Neville said nervously.

"They didn't mean you," Harry scoffed. "You're my mates. They meant...grownups and all."

"How do you know?"

"Hush, Neville, I want to see what it is," Draco nudged him in the ribs as they watched Harry tear off the wrapping-paper. Shimmering cloth, thin and slick, spilled out over his hands. Draco gasped.

"Is that really -- " he began, looking to Harry for permission before touching the fabric, carefully.

"Really what?" Harry asked.

"If it is, it's got to be worth a fortune," Draco continued. "My mum's been looking for one forever."

"What is it, Draco?" Neville asked.

Draco lifted the fabric out of Harry's hands. "Go on, stand up," he said, shaking it out. It looked like a cloak, large enough to fit a grown man; Harry stood obediently and Draco hung it on his shoulders, then came around the front to close it at his throat.

"Merlin," Neville said reverently.

"Look down," Draco ordered, and Harry yelped.

"My body's gone!"

"That's an invisibility cloak!" Neville said delightedly. "Pull the hood up!"

Harry reached behind him and pulled the cowl of the cloak over his eyes.

"You've gone," Draco said. "Brilliant. They're really rare, Harry."

"Look, this fell out when you unwrapped the cloak," Neville said, picking up a slip of paper. "Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you. No signature."

Harry lifted the cowl and took the cloak off, reverently, fingers slipping through the silky mass as he folded it.

"My father," he said, awed. "I haven't got hardly anything of his -- just photos Remus and Sirius gave me..."

"Got a lot more now," Neville said. "Just think of what you can do with that, Harry."

"No more running from Filch!" Draco laughed. "With that you could walk right past him and he'd never know."

"Who do you suppose sent it?" Neville mused. "Can't be Professor Snape, he hated your dad, I heard Andromeda say so -- "

"Quick, hide it," Draco said. "Someone's on the stairs."

Harry slipped the cloak under his school shirts in his trunk, just as there was a knock on the door.

"Harry?" Sirius called. "What're you doing up here, you're far too quiet!"

"Just getting my chessboard, Sirius!" Harry called, and Neville and Draco snickered.

"Oh splendid, shall we have a game?" Sirius asked, when Harry opened the door. "Who's it going to be, you and me? Or were you challenging Draco?"

"You and me," Harry said, grinning as he rummaged under his bed for the chessboard. The pieces complained loudly when he got to his feet and they rattled in their box.

"Good Christmas, then?" Sirius asked, following the boys down the stairs.

"Very good Christmas," Harry answered, firmly, thinking of the silver-grey cloak in his trunk upstairs.

Dear Harry, Neville, and Draco,

I hope you three are well. I am fine; it's been clear out lately so I've been escaping to the garden while Parvati distracts my family. She says to say hello to Neville.

It was nice to see you and Mr&Ms Tonks and Mr Black and Mr Lupin last week at Diagon Alley. Please tell Mr Black that the seeds I was buying have sprouted already. Also my mum likes him awfully, and Ms Tonks too. Mr Lupin is very quiet, isn't he? Is he that quiet all the time, Harry? Tell him thank you for showing me the little greenhouse in Madam Schaeffer's shop, it works very well.

I hope everyone had a nice Christmas. Thank you for the card and the sweets. Parvati's already stolen some, but I got back at her by putting some of the licorice spiders in her bed. If she wants sweets she can have them, right? She just about jumped out of her nightclothes when one crawled up her leg. Thanks, Draco, I know those were your idea.

You'll never guess what I got for Christmas, so I won't tell you, but you'll know when you see me. Are we meeting at the train station? If so would you please buy two new Ravenclaw ties and I'll pay you back, mine are all worn. Please write back soon since it's awfully boring here,

Padma

They were late getting to the station for the train ride back to Hogwarts, since Neville's toad had got lost again. Half an hour of calling Trevor! all over the old town-house finally produced a half-hearted croak from a kitchen cupboard, where Trevor had somehow managed to climb into a saucepan and was unable to get out. Sirius ran off with an overloaded trolley to get their luggage on the train while Andromeda shooed the boys towards the tail-end of the boarding line and kissed them each goodbye, double-checking to make sure they had money for the snack trolley.

The train jolted into motion just as they found themselves in the corridor, and Neville, who had Trevor clutched in both hands, fell over onto Draco; Harry caught them both and pushed them upright, checking to make sure Snake -- who had spent most of the last two months hibernating -- was still safe in his pocket. They stumbled down the rows of compartments until Harry caught sight of Padma in an otherwise empty one, and they all piled inside.

"I almost thought you'd be left behind," she said, clutching a box on her lap, "and I had to be quite sharp with Nott to keep him from stealing the compartment."

"Thanks," Neville said, flopping down on the bench next to Padma while Draco and Harry arranged themselves on the facing seats. "Does it smell strange in here to you?"

Harry sniffed. "Sort of like a spice shop?" he suggested. Padma giggled. "What's so funny?"

Padma opened the box, and the strong scent of peppers and fire filled the compartment. Neville wrinkled his nose and put Trevor in his pocket, but Harry leaned forward interestedly.

Inside the box was a small, luminescent lizard, white with pale blue mottled spots, gnawing happily on a tiny red pepper. When Harry's shadow fell over it, it looked up and made a sort of crackling noise. Padma scooped it up -- Draco winced as though she might burn herself -- and held it in the palm of her hand.

"He's a salamander," she said, as the small creature curled up on her palm and glowed. Harry thought if he looked hard enough he could see the red pepper in its tiny stomach. "I got him for Christmas. Our parents said we could each get a pet for Christmas. Parvati got a kitten."

"Great," Neville muttered. "Anastasia Brott's cat already shreds my socks every time she brings it down to the common room."

"Is she the fifth-year with the pigtails?" Draco asked.

"That's her."

"Well, Elmo is much less trouble than a boring old kitten," Padma said affectionately. "Though he did keep setting fire to my ties, but he can't help it. When he gets nervous he gets all hot."

"I thought salamanders only lived inside fires," Neville said, leaning forward to put himself on eye level with the small creature.

"I've never seen a magical salamander," Harry said cautiously, "But most normal salamanders live in...wet logs and things."

"As long as he's not in his fire I have to keep feeding him peppers," Padma said. "I've got a little jar of fire mum charmed for me -- he's going to live there, when I get it set up in the dormitory -- but I had to pack it in my trunk." She eased Elmo back into the box and shut the lid after giving him another pepper and a reassuring pat. "What'd you get, Neville -- is that a toad?"

"Oh, yeah," Neville said cheerfully, producing Trevor, who eyed Padma suspiciously and then licked his own eyeball. Harry and Draco, who had not yet tired of this trick, said "Yuck!" enthusiastically.

"You can do all sorts of neat things with toads," Padma said approvingly. Neville looked vaguely worried at her tone. "I mean. They're very good familiars, is what I hear, since they don't get scared easily."

"Oh," Neville said, relieved. "I thought you meant...bits of toads."

"Well, that too," Padma agreed. "Listen, did you find anything out while you were at home? You know, about...what we talked about?"

"Not much," Harry said glumly. "Draco found out that if you drink a unicorn's blood it'll save your life, but you'll be cursed. Then Sirius caught us looking at his old family tapestry and locked us out."

"Such a shame," Padma said. Then she gave them a wicked grin and produced a sheet of parchment. The other three bent over it, reading.

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make any drinker immortal.

The only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty eight).

"It makes the drinker immortal?" Draco asked, confused.

"Sounds like firewhiskey," Harry grinned.

"Imm -- no," Padma said, snatching the sheet. "That should be immortal, sorry, I was copying in the dark. I had to sneak into Dad's study to find it, I tried looking in my mum's bookshelf but it's all Eastern magic, there wasn't anything about the Philosopher's Stone at all."

"Eastern magic?" Draco inquired.

"Yeah, mum did an advanced degree. Lots of...'different' magic, meditation, that kind of thing," Padma said offhandedly. "She says she'd like to come teach a class at Hogwarts about it, only the Board of Governors are dead set against it."

"Urgh, imagine having to take a class from your parents!" Neville said. "That'd be like...like having Andromeda teach us."

"Or Remus!" Harry laughed.

"Why's the Board of Governors against it?" Draco asked. "My mum's a member. She never goes, though."

"I think they don't like it because it doesn't fit," Padma said. "I mean, not using wands or Latin, or anything."

"Huh," Harry said. "Anyway, least now we know. S'cool, isn't it? I'd like to be immortal. Reckon we need to do some more research? Maybe there's another one somewhere."

"Done all the reading Professor Snape gave you?" Padma asked, grinning.

"Almost. It's really boring, though, and it's not about potions at all," Harry said.

"What's it about then?"

"This and that," Harry replied vaguely.

"Go on Harry, show her what you got for Christmas," Draco said, elbowing him. Harry stood up and reached for the small bag he'd brought on the train with him, drawing the invisibility cloak out. Padma gasped as Harry pulled it on and vanished.

"No more sneaking around the corridors!" Neville announced happily.

"It is wonderful Harry, did your godfather give it to you?" Padma asked.

"That's the best part! It's a secret. The house-elves gave it to Professor Snape, who gave it to me, but the card didn't say who it was really from," Harry said, taking off the cloak and re-folding it. "Go on and show her your hat, Draco."

Draco produced his house-elf hat, and Padma shrieked with laughter until one of the prefects had to tell them to settle down.

That night, after the feast and the homecoming and the settling-in, Harry sat on his bed, lost in thought. The other boys had gone to bed; Crabbe and Goyle gorged on the rich dinner, Theo out of boredom since his two goons were snoring away, and Blaise after a few minutes' conversation with Harry about their respective holidays.

The moon outside was waxing, and would be full in about a week; he thought about Remus, who had undergone a Change just before Christmas, and how he ought to get started on another long letter. There wouldn't be much to tell, but he'd fill at least fourteen inches of parchment somehow. Perhaps he could draw him a map of Hogwarts. Remus liked maps; back when they'd owned Sandust, he'd kept a collection of vintage maps in a case in the back.

In fact, he could map out quite a lot of Hogwarts, if he could wander around at night, unseen...

He grinned and got off the bed, opening his bag quietly and removing the cloak. It swirled and settled over his shoulders lightly, and he pulled the cowl down low to hide his face. The edges of it pooled in front of his feet, but if he hitched it up a little over his shoulders...

He turned to the mirror near the door; nothing. Not a ripple in the air or the blur of an outline to suggest where he might be. His father must have done this, once; up in the Gryffindor tower, checking to make sure his feet didn't show underneath it. His father's cloak. He would have been happy if it had been just a Hogwarts school cloak, really; he would never have asked that something of his father's would be so useful, as well.

He could go exploring all he wanted, and when he got back he'd draw Remus a map of where he'd been.

If his father had used this, maybe Remus and Sirius had too, once. The thought of them, sneaking around Hogwarts like he was about to do, made him grin happily and invisibly as he pushed the dormitory door open and passed through the common room, out to the labyrinth of hallways in the dungeon. Light shone out from under the door in Professor Snape's rooms, and Harry was glad he hadn't worn shoes.

He made his way up the stairs and into the ground-floor corridor, stopping in front of the main staircase. From here he could go anywhere; up to Gryffindor tower, back to the stairwell where they'd encountered Fluffy, even right past Filch's office if he liked. Before he could decide, however, he heard footsteps on the stone behind him.

He hung back against a wall as Professor Snape came into view, carrying a lantern in one hand and his slim quill-and-ink case in the other. Innate curiosity combined with hero-worship was no match for an eleven-year-old's sense of discretion, and he followed, almost running to keep up with Snape's long stride. By the time they reached Snape's apparent goal, the library, Harry was out of breath and trying not to pant too loudly.

Another child might have balked, but Harry was at home in the unlit stacks; he had never understood why his fellow children found the darkened library frightening. Sandust had been the safest place he'd ever lived. He stepped through the door in Snape's wake, and only hesitated when the professor strode without pause into the Restricted Section.

He watched as Snape slowed, walking down the aisle with deliberate patience, clearly looking for something. His pale fingers drifted over the covers of books without touching them, and in the dark the three jagged marks on his right temple seemed almost black.

Harry stepped slowly into the off-limits area, and when no alarms sounded, inched his way down the aisle to peer under Snape's elbow. He'd found the 200s, and Harry cast his mind back to the orientation on the Derwent Decimal System -- Magical Lore. He touched one binding, then shook his head and took the one next to it. Harry ducked away as he turned and moved to sit at a nearby study table, opening the book and unrolling a narrow sheet of parchment from inside his quill-case. Harry moved closer, peering at the book.

Looking back on it later, he realised he must have been breathing hard, still, and hadn't noticed that he was not absolutely silent; he also didn't notice Snape's fingers creeping towards the wand lying on the table next to the quill-case until Snape snatched it up and turned in his seat, shouting "Expelliarmus!"

Fortunately Snape's aim was wide, and Harry turned and fled while several books flew out of the nearby shelf and began to shriek. He heard Snape's boots on stone and knew he was being pursued; Filch threw the door to the library open just before Harry reached it, and he dodged past the caretaker, bolting down the hallway as fast as he could go.

Behind him, Snape yelled something in alarm, and he glanced over his shoulder in time to see the two men tumble together into the hallway. Snape was up in an instant and following him, and Harry gulped down the noise of his breathing, trying to run as lightly as possible. Filch shouted and followed after; Harry came to a turn in the hallway and went left down the better-lit corridor, which proved to be a mistake, as Snape saw the torches flicker in the rush of air as he ran past, and followed again.

Harry had no doubt that if he were caught this time, extra reading would be the least of his worries.

He darted up a flight of stairs but the boards creaked -- clearly invisibility wasn't everything -- and then down another dim hallway, this one unlit. A suit of armor loomed up on his left and he slipped past it into the niche it was situated in, crouching behind tarnished silver kneeplates and trying not to make a sound. At the end of the hallway Snape stopped, listened intently, looked around carefully, and then cursed violently. Filch's footsteps on the stone drowned out Harry's quick breaths for a moment, and then their conversation echoed back to him.

"We've lost it," Snape said, angrily. "Whatever it was."

"Spectre perhaps?"

"I doubt it. There's no reason for any of the ghosts, visible or not, to spy on my personal research."

"And it's dark times," Filch said dourly, as they began to walk back towards Harry. "A bad business, this. Shall I keep looking?"

"Very little point, now. I'll speak to the Headmaster in the morning."

"I don't like it. First that bloody troll, then someone upsetting Fluffy and a unicorn being killed in the forest -- "

"Two."

"Two?"

"Hagrid," and Snape's voice was lightly tinged with distaste for the fumbling, overly-large groundskeeper, "found another one. It managed to escape -- whoever was pursuing it -- but the wounds were too great."

"And the attack on the Potter boy," Filch continued. "Not that that one couldn't use a -- "

"I would appreciate if you did not malign my students to my face," Snape said sharply, and Harry, clutching the stitch in his side, grinned just a little.

"I'll feel better when the last ward is in place on the Stone, is all. Bloody Flamel saddling us with this -- someone's sneakin' around after it, that much's clear."

"I'm handling the situation."

"Dumbledore ought'a -- "

"I'm handling the situation," Snape snapped. "I should think after ten years on the school staff my discretion and judgement would be trusted."

They turned the corner to head down the stairs again, and Harry didn't hear Filch's reply; he counted to two hundred, just in case, and then slowly slunk out of the little display niche, careful not to disturb the armor at all.

He was in an unfamiliar corridor, perhaps a wing of the castle where the upper-level classes were taught; next to him was the doorway to what looked like an unused classroom, full of desks and chairs piled together in a heap. There was a strange light on the ceiling, like the reflection off something shiny, and Harry peered through the doorway, looking for its source.

It turned out to be a tall, gold-framed mirror, shoved off into one corner. It was oval-shaped, and two small rods protruding from either side attached it to the stand, which looked like it was made to resemble horse's legs, with hooves instead of the usual claw-feet one normally saw on old furniture.

There was a single word carved across the top:

Y N I T S E D

He was too far to one side to see his own reflection, but he could see part of the mirror itself; although it reflected light from the moonlit windows onto the ceiling, the glass surface was full of black, roiling smoke, like thunderclouds ahead of the wind. Only on the edges did he see the reflections of things in the room -- a flicker of shadowy desk, or arched window.

He made his way across the floor, towards it, pulling off the cowl as he did so. He breathed easier when the fresh, cool air of the room hit his face, and turned fully to the mirror to see what his floating head looked like. Instead, the smoke behind the glass began to shift frantically, as though it was conscious of his presence and frightened by it, and after a moment of furious movement, it dissipated.

Harry gasped and clutched at his collarbone; the mirror had shown him his whole body, even though in reality most of it was still under the cloak. In the reflection his shirt was torn open, the old scar Peter Pettigrew had left on his chest dribbling blood down over his skin --

His fingers, expecting warm blood, found only the slick chill of the invisibility cloak, and he pulled it off. Underneath his shirt was whole, and he shed that too, until he was looking down at his own bare chest, where the scar was as thin and pale as ever. There was no blood.

He looked up at the mirror again, and the smoke whirled across once more; now he looked older somehow, taller and more lanky. His hands, held in front of him, now reflected back covered in blood, though he could clearly see that his real hands were pale and clean. He turned them over, to be sure, and the mirror-Harry did likewise, a look of horror on his face that was not the reflection of the curiosity on Harry's.

The smoke swirled again, slower now, and the image was less clear, as though he was seeing it without his glasses -- a crowd of people surrounding a young man, surrounding Harry grown to adulthood, holding out their hands in welcome. Not Sirius, not any of the adults he knew, and before he could identify them, the smoke had filled the mirror again, and refused to show him any more.

He picked up his shirt, almost worried that the blood on his hands -- which was not actually on his hands -- would stain it, and pulled it on. He was suddenly desperate to escape this mirror, desperate to get back to the safe Slytherin dormitory where Snake was hibernating and Goyle was probably snoring again. He pulled the cloak halfway round his shoulders and was already stepping out into the corridor before he'd pulled his cowl up, walking quietly and cautiously back in the direction he'd come.

When he reached Slytherin dormitory unharmed, he locked the invisibility cloak in a small box in the bottom of his trunk, and promised himself not to use it unless he really needed it. Relic of his father or not, it was clearly a dangerous tool, and one that could get him in heaps more trouble than he usually was in anyway.

The school term began the day after Harry's adventure with the mirror, and brought with it terrible weather and Quidditch. Even Marcus Flint, never the most motivated of captains during practice, put them through their paces in the worst of the rain. If the next game had to be played in a storm -- athletics, with typical British educational equanimity, were never called on account of weather -- then Slytherin, at least, would be ready. Harry was just as grateful for the long hard practices -- his dreams had been unnerving lately, and he slept better when he was exhausted at the end of the day. If his friends noticed, they didn't say anything, although Draco kept shooting Harry worried looks; still, Harry couldn't bring himself to talk about his dreams -- strange dark visions of the scar on his collarbone dripping blood, and the memory of the unicorn screaming.

He almost wrote to Remus, because he knew Remus sometimes had suffered nightmares when Harry was young -- before Betwys Beddau -- but Remus would just fret and tell Sirius and then Sirius would fret, and it wasn't as though anyone could do anything about it. Team practice -- and the ensuing exhaustion -- was a good and practical solution.

The Slytherins weren't the only team hoping to be prepared for anything, Harry discovered, as they passed the sopping, miserable returning Gryffindor team on their way out to the field one day. The twins waved at Harry, who waved back, and all three were promptly shouted at by their teammates for fraternising with the enemy.

Slytherin's defeat of Gryffindor, earlier in the year, had put Slytherin square in first running to play in the Cup, but Gryffindor was playing Hufflepuff in the next game and even Draco would admit that a win was pretty likely for the scarlet-and-gold. That would put Gryffindor and Slytherin up against each other for the championship. If Gryffindor beat Hufflepuff, Slytherin wouldn't even have to play the Badgers -- they'd just play Ravenclaw, and the point spread would decide whether Gryffindor or Ravenclaw went against Slytherin. Gryffindor was favourite.

All of which meant that none of the House teams liked Slytherin very much, but Gryffindor had special reason for rivalry. Especially since Gryffindor and Slytherin had never been the most friendly to begin with.

It all came to a head shortly after the Gryffindor win over Hufflepuff, and Neville was, as small clumsy boys sometimes are, the main casualty. The Slytherins disliked him on general grounds, but at least the first-years could be controlled by Harry, and the higher years felt it was beneath their dignity to notice the firsties. The Gryffindors, on the other hand, felt that Neville was letting the side down by hanging about with a Slytherin.

After it happened, Ron Weasley went to Harry with a solemn promise that none of the Gryffindor first-years had been involved, and Harry believed him; the Weasley twins -- jokesters but not bullies -- controlled everyone below third year, and they played fair. Besides, Neville had said that it was mostly fourth-years: old enough to be bitter and young enough to be unsubtle.

They caught Neville in the library on a warm afternoon before the Easter holiday, when he was fetching books to begin studying for end-of-term exams. Harry and Padma were expected momentarily, and Draco after his conference (yet another one) with McGonagall, but for the moment Neville was alone.

Books and Neville did not agree, particularly. Oh, he was clever enough, at some things, but he was forgetful, and he never took notes properly, and he always seemed to miss the point until much later, when it was too late. He didn't have Harry's love of reading or Padma's love of learning; books didn't comfort him like they did Draco. He thought perhaps it was because he was a Gryffindor and Gryffindors had a certain reputation for obstinate bravery over intelligence. But he did his best, and he followed what the others said, and he fetched the books that Harry or Padma gave him in a list.

He was carrying a list from Harry, scribbled over breakfast that morning, when the candles at the ends of the rows went out, and the stacks were plunged into darkness. On the far side of the library were the windows, and he could press on, but Neville's greatest shame was that he was still afraid of the dark.

His gran had been killed in the dark.

He turned back towards the front of the library where he could still see the glow of lights, and caught a hand in the chest, pushing him back firmly against the shelf. The list fluttered to the ground.

"Doing shopping for the Slytherin?" one of them asked -- four boys and a girl, all Gryffindors, most of whom he knew only passingly.

"He does shopping for him..." the girl said. "And he wears his jewellery..."

The boy holding him against the shelf took the bracelet off his wrist, and Neville reached out for it, protesting.

"Sounds like he belongs to Mr. Potter," said another boy.

"He belongs in Slytherin, with the other turncoats."

"Wasn't a witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin."

"I hear some of them kept Muggles as pets."

"Maybe he's no better than a Muggle."

"He isn't very good with spells, that's for sure."

"Bet you he's a Squib."

"Harry Potter's pet Squib."

The boy who was holding Neville as he struggled finally spoke.

"Then maybe everyone ought to know he's not really a Gryffindor," he said, and he raised his wand, pointing it right between Neville's eyes.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 16

"Well," Padma said cheerfully, "It is a very nice shade of green."

"Makes you look a bit like a pear," Draco added.

Neville, sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, sighed and looked down at his hands.

"You have to say who did it," Padma urged. "The professors won't stand for it."

"If I do they'll just do something worse," Neville said.

"Worse than dyeing you green?" Harry asked angrily.

"There are a lot of worse things, really," Draco said, a thoughtful look on his face. "It lacked imagination."

"Insult on injury," Harry pronounced.

"What?"

"He didn't even get pushed around by imaginative bullies," Harry explained.

"It's not like I just let them, you know!" Neville burst out. "I did try to get away! There were five of them!"

"Unfair, unimaginative sods," Padma agreed. "It's not on."

"And they took my remembrall," Neville continued wrathfully. "The one Sirius made specially for me."

"We'll get you another one," Draco said, at the same time Harry declared "We'll get it back from them!"

"You really do look like a pear," Padma said, as the counter-spell began to take effect, and the original deep green began to fade to a spotty mint-and-yellow shade.

"As soon as you get out you can sneak us into Gryffindor," Harry said. "I bet my cloak could fit three of us, at least. We'll find your remembrall and do something really awful to their dormitory in the process."

"A whole jar of bile!" Draco said. "In their beds!"

"You will not," Neville said. "They'll know it was me."

"They'll know it was you anyway when you tell the professors," Padma said briskly.

"I'm not telling the professors! Next time they might not stop with changing my colour!"

"He's right, you know," Draco said. "We'll have to make it look like an accident."

"All right, children, Mr. Longbottom needs time to let his cure take full effect," said Madam Pomfrey, appearing behind them. "You can visit him again this evening after dinner. Run along, now."

With a last regretful glance at Neville, the three of them followed Madam Pomfrey into the outer room of the hospital wing, away from the infirmary itself. Professor McGonagall was there, waiting with apparent impatience to be let in to see Neville.

"We could go do more research on the Philosopher's Stone," Padma suggested, as they walked down the corridor.

"Oh, blow the stupid Philosopher's Stone," Draco said suddenly. "We've done all the research we can and don't know a thing more about it. If they're hiding it here like Harry thinks, I'm sure it's for a bloody good reason."

"Yeah, but..." Padma bit her lip. "Someone's tried to get at it. Harry heard Snape and Filch talking about it."

"Well, if they have to get past Professor Snape to get to it, I think it's plenty safe," Draco sulked. "He could just scowl at them."

Padma opened her mouth to speak, then glanced around.

"I think we need to talk about that," she whispered. "Clearly the library's not safe anymore. Let's go outside."

Harry and Draco followed her dutifully down the stairway and out into the late-afternoon sunlight, across the damp grounds to the relative shelter of

a large, lichen-covered rock. Draco scrambled up onto the wide flat top, followed by Padma and Harry.

"What is it, then?" Harry asked, once they'd settled themselves. "It won't take long, will it? Dinner's in forty minutes."

"Listen, Harry..." Padma bit her lip, then forged ahead. "I think we need to consider the idea that Professor Snape might be the one who's trying to get the Stone."

"No we don't," Harry said flatly, "Cos he isn't."

"Just hear me out? Professor Snape's the one who got attacked by the big dog you and Draco found on the third floor. You said yourself you helped him with his dog bite. He's the one who's been doing all the research on the Philosopher's Stone, and he's the one who was talking to someone else about it. We know he was awake the night the unicorn was attacked because he caught you coming back from it." Padma swallowed. "And one of the people who attacked it was tall enough -- "

"It's not. Professor. Snape," Harry said.

"Harry, I know you like him, but -- "

"It's not him."

"She has a point," Draco said. Harry turned to him, and Draco almost fell backwards.

"What do you know about it?" he asked.

"Well, I know everything Padma knows," Draco said quietly. "And I know that Professor Snape knew my dad."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Harry demanded.

"His dad's in Azkaban, Harry," Padma reminded him gently. "Because he was a follower of You-Know-Who."

"Professor Snape is not -- "

"But what if he is, Harry?" Padma asked. "Everything points to him. You know what the Philosopher's Stone is. How many people do you know who'd pass up a chance at that? And he's a Slytherin, and even you can't deny Slytherins are supposed to be ambitious. Even if he doesn't want it for himself, there's a chance he could want it because -- well, nobody knows that You-Know-Who is actually dead..."

Harry scowled. "It isn't Professor Snape. Neville would agree with me."

"Neville's been dyed green by his own housemates, he's not exactly the best judge of character," Draco said. Harry was about to retort when Padma put a hand on his arm.

"Even if it is him there's nothing we can do right now," she said. "All I'm saying is that we ought to keep an eye on him. There's nine weeks until exams, and if he hasn't done anything by then, we'll say we're sorry and admit we were wrong, won't we, Draco?"

"I hope it's not him," Draco said. "I really do, Harry."

Harry, who in his heart was not quite as sure as he'd declared himself to be, nodded and held out his hand. The other two shook it, and then they all turned back to the school, trudging up the hill to a dinner that none of them really had the stomach for.

Between Quidditch practice, their new duties bodyguarding Neville, and their reluctant surveillance of Snape, the time passed quickly. Neville had refused to give up the names of the students in question and the resulting loss of seventy-five points hit Gryffindor hard, but Harry made arrangements with the twins to watch Neville when he, Padma, and Draco couldn't, and no further harm came to him.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin the week after Easter holidays, and although Marcus Flint told Harry to draw it out as long as possible so that the Ravenclaws could cover the points needed to beat out Gryffindor for Cup contenders, the Ravenclaw Seeker would have snatched the Snitch and won the game if he didn't get it first, and thus Ravenclaw lost one hundred and fifty to twenty. Harry took a shouting-at from Flint over it, but most of the school agreed it would be more interesting to see Gryffindor and Slytherin in Cup contention anyway. Harry's nightmares about what he'd seen in the mirror slowly abated, to be replaced by anxiety dreams about not being able to find his Nimbus, or the Snitch being greased so that he couldn't get his fingers around it.

There was also, of course, the plot to steal Neville's remembrall back. McGonagall had written to the Tonkses about the bullying, and Sirius, who had been in the kitchen when the letter was opened, sent off another prototype the same day. Still, it wasn't the same, and they all knew it.

"It's got to be vicious," Harry said finally. "So that even when they find out it's us, they won't do anything."

"How does that make us any better than them?" Padma asked.

"We're doing it to people who can fight back," Draco replied. "Besides, I don't care if we're better than them, just scarier."

Padma and Neville, sitting across from Harry and Draco at their usual early-morning breakfast, looked slightly dismayed. Neville twiddled the new remembrall-bracelet on his wrist, anxiously.

"They dyed him green," Harry said. "Listen, if we do it near end-of-term, and we scare them badly enough, they'll have all summer to think about what they did and what we can do to them."

"But we don't have to hurt them, right?" Neville asked hesitantly.

"Nobody said anything about hurting anyone," Harry said, as Snake, recently out of hibernation, peeped out from the collar of his shirt. "We just want them to think we could hurt them, if they dyed you green again."

"Fine," Padma said, "but we all have to agree on what we do before anyone does anything. I'm not going to risk detention to do something I don't approve of just because you two took Ender's Game a little too seriously."

"That was a brilliant book and you know it," Harry retorted. "All right. So we'll come up with ideas and you can say yea or nay as appropriate."

"No," Padma said, "First we'll eat, and then we'll go to class, and then we'll study because exams are only six weeks away, and then, if we have time, we'll come up with ideas together, the four of us."

"Prefects coming," Neville grunted, and he, Padma, and Draco rose as one, spreading to their respective tables. Harry fed a little fried-egg to Snake, and watched the Gryffindor table as students began trickling into the Great Hall. Neville had pointed out the students he'd seen clearly, and Harry's green eyes tracked them as soon as they came in.

"Psyching out the competition, Potter?" Flint asked, as he passed.

"Working on his thousand-yard stare," Blaise answered, seating himself across from Harry and giving him a grin. "Ready for the big game, eh?"

Harry summoned a smile in return, as Blaise poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice.

"Going to show them what happens when you tangle with Slytherin House," he agreed.

Exams began to loom large on the horizon by the time Harry had concocted a plan that would please Padma and satisfy Draco's desire to terrorise the Gryffindors. It was low-risk, high-yield, and, while not as public as they would have liked, guaranteed to be the talk of the school. Harry felt he was living up to his godfather's reputation as school prankster quite nicely.

The professors, distracted by the fifth and seventh year students who would be taking their OWL and NEWT exams, left the younger children much to their own devices, with broad hints about the exam's content and review sessions conducted mainly by Ravenclaw sixth-year teachers' aides. Padma made them go to every single one, even the repeat ones. Neville seemed to be struggling along even with the repeats, and Padma decreed they would all make flashcards; they weren't as fancy as the ones Remus and Sirius used to make to quiz him with, where the card actually flashed when you got the answer right, but they were still useful – especially when Harry and Draco wrote naughty limericks on theirs and shuffled them in with Neville's. After all, Draco was only having trouble with Transfiguration (as usual) and Harry's main weakness was Charms, which flashcards wouldn't help much on anyhow.

It helped, too, that each Head of House, consciously or not, wanted their own students to do best, and would drop more hints to their particular House. Swapping notes, Harry informed them that Professor Snape was more than likely to make them brew a Forgetfulness potion, while Neville insisted that Professor McGonagall was going to give them rodents to be transfigured, though he didn't know what she'd make them produce.

The written papers were far more intimidating, really, since there was less room for error; they were marched into a large classroom and given new quills with anti-cheating charms on them, and set to writing essays from a list of questions on the large blackboard at the front. After doing that for a day, the practicals began to look like a relief.

"I say we do it tomorrow night," Harry said, as they were pretending to study in the library after their first day of practicals. Draco was sulking because he hadn't been given a rodent at all in Transfigurations; he'd been given a magpie and made to transfigure it into five silver sickles, and had barely managed it. Neville was nursing a bite from his rodent, which had nevertheless made an adequate leather cigarette case, and Padma was agonising over whether she had made the Forgetfulness potion strong enough, since after Professor Snape made her sample some she couldn't remember brewing it at all. Harry had gotten through the day uninjured, but he feared that in his Charms practical his pineapple hadn't tapdanced as it was supposed to; it seemed more inclined to waltz.

"Tomorrow night?" Padma asked, looking up from the big textbook on potions she was studying. "Why then? Day after tomorrow we've got our History of Magic exam, and it's another written one."

"Yeah, but the fourth-years all have their Potions final, and it'll be fun sending them off to Snape all upset and scared," Draco said with a grin. "Plus it gets hot down there, and they won't even be able to loosen the collars of their robes."

"But we have to study," Padma objected. "Don't we, Neville?"

Neville gave the other boys a reluctant look. "It would help," he said. "I've not got a clue about the 1635 Werewolf Code of Conduct."

"1637," Padma and Harry corrected.

"It won't take that long. We can study all evening, since they won't go to bed forever anyhow, and then once they're in bed we'll just nip up, do what we came to do, and scoot off to sleep," Draco said. "I'll pretend I'm studying with Neville, and Harry can use his cloak to fetch Padma."

Padma looked reluctant, but there was really no reason to object; besides, Harry had seen a mischevious gleam in her eye once or twice that told him she would, at least, consider their prank a testament to their magical knowledge. Sort of a final practical.

They spent the rest of the evening in much better spirits, went to bed with light hearts, and though the following day was exhausting, exchanged knowing looks over dinner. Neville and Draco went off after the meal to study in the common room, aided -- or perhaps distracted -- by the Weasley twins plus Ron, who were testing out a new Exploding Snap game that involved spiritedly attempting to blow up one's opponent. Padma vanished into the library where she would later be collected by Harry, who went quietly and unobtrusively to his room to spend the evening helping Snake shed his skin.

Soon the school year would be over, he reflected, as he waited for the other boys in the dormitory to fall asleep. There was one final day of exams, a week of waiting during which they'd play the Cup match, and then the scores would be posted and they'd have the Leaving feast. Harry and Neville were going back to London for the summer, and Padma's parents were taking their family to see her great-gran in Agra, which she was mostly excited about because she'd get to see the Taj Mahal. Draco was quietly desperate not to go back to the Malfoy mansion, but there was nothing to be done, and so he was giving Harry a sealed-up box of his private things to keep for him until they came back to school.

He waited until Theo was snoring, a sure sign everyone else had gone to sleep, and then crawled out of bed, taking the cloak from his trunk and wrapping it around his shoulders. Snake, sleeping in his box on the nightstand, hissed a sleepy query, and Harry told him to go back to sleep. He hesitated over whether or not to go barefoot, and finally settled for pulling a large pair of socks on over his trainers.

Padma was waiting for him in the library, hidden in a reading niche that Madam Pince always missed while doing her lights-out check.

"Took you long enough," she whispered, as she ducked under the cloak. "This place is creepy at night."

"It's just books," Harry answered, creeping rather more slowly now towards the stairs. It was difficult, managing the steps with two people under the cloak, but they made it to Gryffindor's portrait just as it swung open to reveal Neville's head, peering out.

"You there?" he asked softly.

"Who's that?" the Pink Lady demanded. Harry touched Neville's shoulder as they passed, and Neville startled, but kept his head.

"Just Neville," he informed the portrait. "Have you seen Trevor?"

"I don't keep track of your silly pets," the Pink Lady replied grumpily.

"Thanks anyway," Neville answered, closing the portrait-hole again. Once in the Gryffindor common room, Harry peered around to make sure it was just the four of them before shedding the cloak.

"Nearly gave me a heart attack, touching me without warning," Neville scolded.

"Sorry. She'd have heard me if I'd said anything," Harry replied unrepentantly. "I've brought the paint. You bring the other stuff?"

Neville gave them a downright wicked grin and held up a bag made of black cloth. "Nicked them from Hagrid's tack-trunk early this morning. They still stink." He opened the bag and a waft of foul, animal-smelling air floated out.

"All right. We'll do the boys first, then send Padma up to deal with the girl," Harry decided. "Draco, you paint."

"Why me?" Draco asked, accepting a small pot of green paint from Harry's pocket. He produced a brush he'd nicked from one of the more artistically inclined Hufflepuffs, and twiddled it between his fingers.

"Because you've got the best handwriting, and Padma's going to be the one looking for Neville's remembrall."

Draco muttered rebelliously, but shoved the paint-pot in his pocket. They all looked at Padma, who bit her lip and accepted the cloak from Harry.

"Follow me up," she whispered. "I'm going to cast the spell and then I'll give the signal for you to come inside the room."

They crept quietly up the stairs to the fourth-floor boys' dormitory, and Padma eased the door open. Harry couldn't see her, but he knew she was checking to make sure everyone was asleep. He saw a ripple of fabric for a moment; without taking off the cowl, she'd produced a packet of powder from her trouser pockets and tapped it out onto her hand.

The powder suddenly dissolved in the air, flying away as if a breeze had caught it, and Harry counted ten, fifteen, thirty, sixty under his breath before Padma shed the cowl, too, and gestured them inside.

"That'll keep them asleep for at least three hours," she said. "You could stampede elephants through this room and they wouldn't wake up, but I'd better keep an eye on it. Work fast," she finished, as she began digging through nightstands and trunks, looking for the remembrall bracelet.

The boys ran to the first bed, and gave each other a final look before setting to work. Draco pulled the blankets down to waist-level and studied the problem of how to get the boy's pyjama shirt up at least high enough to paint properly; finally he settled for slipping the brush under the t-shirt and doing rather sloppy work. Harry and Neville, meanwhile, took one of the wide leather dog-collars Hagrid sometimes used to catch kneazles with, and slid it carefully under the sleeping boy's neck, buckling it in place.

"Did you do the charm?" Harry asked Neville, who gulped and nodded.

"They should be un-removable for almost a day," Neville said. "I hope they work, otherwise they'll be stuck there forever."

"I hope they get stuck," Draco said, as much to his surprise as theirs. "I'm done, how're you two doing?"

"Almost there," Harry said, checking the buckle. "What'd you paint?"

He craned his neck to see, and gave Draco a disappointed look. "Pet? That's the best you could come up with?"

"It's hard to paint under a t-shirt!" Draco protested.

"All right, let's do the next one -- no, not him," Harry said, as they went to the second bed. "He wasn't involved, was he Nev?"

"No," Neville said. "And I only brought five collars. He was, though," he said, pointing to the third bed.

"Oh, and he's shirtless too," Draco grinned maliciously. "I could write an epic poem on him."

He settled for "Slytherin Owns You" which was all he could manage in the time it took Harry and Neville to fix the collar. "Pet Gryffindor" and "Property Of Salazar Slytherin" followed in short order.

"Careful," Harry warned. "Don't get any on your hands, it doesn't wash off."

"I know, you told me," Draco answered, annoyed.

"Aha!" Padma said triumphantly, and they saw her flash the bracelet. "He was keeping it in his shoes, the disrespectful beast," she said, kicking the bed that the second boy -- "Pet Gryffindor" -- was sleeping on.

"Oh, ta, Padma," Neville said, accepting the bracelet. "Phew. I think I'll wash it before I put it on again. How long does this paint take to wear away?" he inquired, checking the buckle on the last victim. Draco, in a fit of creativity, drew a little snake on the one they'd just done, who had a button-down shirt that was easily opened.

"About two weeks," Harry said, with a satisfied air. "Less if you wash with vinegar every day."

"All done?" Padma asked, as Draco sealed the paint pot and Neville tied up the bag again. They nodded. "Up to me now."

"What're you gonna write on her?" Draco asked excitedly.

"I don't think that would be proper," Padma replied, and gestured at her own chest. The boys blushed slightly. "Don't worry, though, I know all about miss Elaine Brocklehurst. She'll scream louder than the boys when she finds out I painted snakes on her hands, and dyed all her shoes green."

"Brilliant," Neville said approvingly.

"You three wait for me near the portrait-hole. If someone comes down, they won't see you," Padma said, and pulled the cloak around her shoulders again, literally vanishing into the stairwell.

The boys took one last look around.

"I wish we could take pictures," Draco said.

"Too much evidence," Harry replied. "Padma's leaving the paint bottle in the girls' dormitory so that we don't get caught with it," he added, as they began to wind their way cautiously down to the common room. "Neville, maybe you'd better stay with one of us tonight."

"That'd be like...an admission of guilt," Draco answered.

"Yeah, but they can't prove anything, and they'll know it was us anyhow, since the bracelet's gone," Harry answered. "I mean. Better an unprovable admission of guilt than a broken arm or something, right?"

"Do you think they'd break my arms?" Neville asked in a high, nervous voice.

"Not if you're sleeping in Hufflepuff tonight," Draco said. "We can say you walked me back to the dorm and fell asleep on the couch."

"Perfect," Harry replied.

Padma arrived in short order, rolling up the now-empty bag and tossing it on the fire, where a few quick words and a flick of her wand took care of the last of the evidence handily.

"Neville's sleeping in Hufflepuff tonight," Harry whispered, and she nodded.

"Maybe you ought to take me to Ravenclaw and then come back -- I don't think the cloak's going to hold four," she said doubtfully.

"Leave the portrait just a little bit open," Harry said to the other two boys. "I'll be back soon."

He ducked under the cloak with Padma and they made their slow, somewhat clumsy way towards the staircase to the Ravenclaw eyrie. A little over halfway there, they passed the fifth-floor room where they'd held their seance, and Padma's fingers gripped his arm under the cloak.

"Someone's in there," she said, softly. Harry obediently turned into the room, and saw a dark-cloaked figure vanishing down the staircase.

"Bugger," he whispered. "Bet you the dog eats him."

After a moment, however, when there were no screams forthcoming, Harry and Padma exchanged a look under the cloak, and pressed forward, down the staircase that would lead to the three-headed-dog's lair.

Harry barely suppressed a gasp.

Professor Snape stood at the foot of the staircase, calmly, playing a silver penny-whistle. In front of him, the dog was swaying on its feet, clearly torn between attacking and taking a nap. Finally its legs buckled, and Snape didn't miss a beat as it fell to the floor with a thud. All three heads began snoozing at once, and Snape continued to play one-handed as he bent to lift a platform in the floor, behind the dog.

Harry watched in horror as Professor Snape tossed the whistle aside -- it clattered down against the bottom step -- and slipped gracefully into the darkness below the trapdoor.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 17

"Take the cloak," Harry said. "Go get Neville and Draco. You were right, he's gone after the stone -- "

"Sorry, Harry!" Padma said, distressed, as he shoved the cloak around her shoulders. She bolted up the stairs, and Harry eyed the dog fearfully. Another few steps and he'd be out of the safety of the stairs, but it did seem to be sleeping...

He padded, grateful now for the muffling socks over his shoes, down the stone steps carefully. The dog snorted. Harry bent and reached for the whistle. So far so good -- a little further --

The whistle, made of some kind of cheap tin, clattered against the step when he picked it up, and the dog woke with a start. Harry backpedaled desperately, and the dog's jaws -- all three of them -- clicked shut a bare six inches from his chest. He scrambled up the stairs to safety just as the other three returned and almost tripped on him.

"Snape's gone down there?" Draco asked, wide-eyed.

"Braver than I thought," Neville said. "We've got to do something -- warn someone -- "

"No-one's awake, and there's no time," Harry said. "We have to follow him."

"Follow him?" Padma demanded. "Are you insane?"

"Music puts the dog to sleep," Harry insisted.

"We can't stop him, he's a grown wizard!" Draco protested.

"He's Professor Snape," Neville added frantically.

"It'd be four against one," Harry said stubbornly. "Listen, I'm going. Follow me or don't."

He set his lips to the whistle and blew a sharp, shrill note. It wasn't very soothing, but the dog did stop snarling. It looked almost...surprised. Harry blew another one, clumsily, working his fingers at random on the stops. The dog tilted its heads and made a sort of querying noise.

"Let me," Padma said, as Harry whistled a third, even more dissonant note. She took the whistle from him and immediately began playing again; she wasn't much better, but at least it sounded a little like music.

As Padma played, the dog began to back away from the stairs, stumbling sleepily around the room. Harry advanced slowly, hearing the others follow, until he was almost all the way to the trapdoor. The dog finally threw itself down again, and began to snore. Padma, however, continued to play.

Harry lifted the trap and looked down into the utter, complete blackness.

"We'll have to jump," he said. "If Snape can do it, so can we."

He saw Draco's frightened face and Neville's desperate nod, and slid off the floor, down into darkness feet-first.

He landed with a soft thump, and almost laughed with relief.

"It's an easy landing!" he called up. "Come down!"

He heard Draco and Neville come down in the dark, and then the whistle stopped playing as Padma followed.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, and the end of his wand lit up the gloom.

"Argh!" Draco cried. "It's plants! They're moving!"

Padma let out a tiny shriek. They were indeed sitting on a giant plant, a tangle of vines that were even now reaching out to twine around her ankles -- they'd already got a firm grip on Harry and Neville.

"What is it?" Harry shouted, as one of them wrapped around his chest. "Oh bloody -- "

"Devil's Snare!" Padma yelled back. Their shouts had woken the dog, and in addition to the panic of being trapped by vicious life-threatening plants, the dog was now growling and thumping on the trap-door Padma had closed behind her.

"How do we kill it?" Draco demanded.

"Wait, I know this!" Neville shouted. "We have to light a fire!"

"It's got my wand!" Draco shouted.

"Mine's stuck," Harry gasped.

"Padma, you've got to do it," Neville urged. Padma gripped her wand so tightly it shook, and pointed it at the plant. Fire shot from the end of her wand, nearly singeing Harry's clothing, but it worked -- the plant began to withdraw and cringe away from the heat. As it did so the tangle of vines became looser and looser until Harry fell through, landing on much-harder-stone with a slight oof. Draco, fortunately, landed on Harry, and Padma was able to jump through and help Neville climb down the vines.

"Ow," Harry said.

"Sorry," Draco answered. "Anything broken?"

"Don't think so," Harry replied, accepting a hand to help him to his feet. He looked up as the vines began to twine their way shut again, over their heads. "Guess we have to go on now, don't we?"

"Or we might die here," Padma said.

"What?" Harry demanded. Padma pointed a shaking finger past him.

Professor Snape stood in the only doorway in the room.

"Oh bugger," Draco whispered.

"Children," Snape said slowly. He was staring directly at them, arms crossed over his chest. They stared back in terrified silence.

"We know what you're going to do!" Harry blurted, after a long moment. Snape lifted an eyebrow. "You're going to steal the Philosopher's Stone!"

"Remarkably well-informed and yet still incorrect," Snape sighed. He dropped his arms, and came into the dim room, rolling his eyes. "I'm going to speak quickly since I haven't much time. Someone else has gone in ahead of me and I am in pursuit. Do you understand?"

They nodded, eyes wide.

"Good. Now. I don't know what you were doing out of bed at this time of night and do not care, but you will stay put until the matter is resolved. You will not follow me and you will not cause trouble. Do you understand that?"

"We won't stay," Harry said.

"We'll help you," Neville added, then looked shocked at his own audacity.

"No, children."

"We'll follow you whether you want us to or not," Padma said desperately. It sounded as though she was less eager to follow than she was to escape the Devil's Snare.

"I could, of course, petrify the lot of you, but I prefer not to commit violence against students," Snape replied. "All evidence to the contrary."

"Then the Devil's Snare will get us," Harry pointed to where the plant was already reaching thin tendrils towards them, and Draco jumped back. "How dangerous could it be to go with you?"

Snape gave him a thin smile. "How dangerous, Harry? Do you know how many traps have been placed in front of the Stone's chamber? You've survived two by sheer idiot luck, but there are many more, I assure you. Don't believe me?"

He gestured through the doorway, and the children gathered around to peer through.

On the other side of a short corridor was a high-ceilinged room, filled with what looked like tiny, mechanical birds.

"Keys," Snape said succinctly. "One of them opens that door. Which one, and how to catch it -- HARRY!"

Harry had darted through the passage and picked up a broomstick lying near the entrance. He was aloft before Snape could stop him.

"I saw it!" he cried, as Snape shouted at him to come down at once. He had seen a silver key, matching the motif of the lock, with one slightly-bent wing. He darted after it, through all the other soaring keys, occasionally batting one away when it hit his face or chest. He heard Snape's shouts and the other children's cheers as he dodged through the mess of keys towards his goal. Almost there -- his fingers outstretched -- it was just like catching the Snitch --

His hand closed around the key and the wings beat fiercely against his palm as he descended, only to be grasped by the collar of his shirt the

minute he touched the ground.

"If you ever -- " Snape began, shaking him like a puppy, but Neville and Padma caught his arm and he stopped, releasing Harry suddenly. Harry, terrified of the rage in the Potion Master's eyes, clutched the key tightly.

"Give me the key, Harry," Snape said coldly.

"You're welcome," Harry answered angrily, placing the key in his hand. Snape unlocked the door with a quick, violent movement, and threw it wide. At the same moment, the doorway back to the room with the Devil's Snare in it slammed shut.

"Go, then," Snape ordered, waving them through. "Clearly you can't be trusted with a broomstick in a room full of potential targets."

They trailed in, chastised, and Snape followed. Again the door slammed shut behind them. Before them stood a huge chessboard, lined with life-sized chess pieces, made of black and white stone.

"McGonagall," Snape said with a sigh. "Such a show-off."

"What do you mean?" Padma asked, turning to look at him. He gestured at the chessboard.

"Several professors were asked to build traps into the passageway to the Stone's chamber. Dumbledore felt it would be...fun," he said, with a slight sneer. "Flitwick, myself, McGonagall, Sprout, Quirrell -- plus that outrageously bad-tempered dog above, and a final puzzle Dumbledore built himself. We weren't told what the others were doing, but this," he said, "Reeks of Gryffindor showmanship."

Neville looked annoyed at this, but said nothing.

"What do we do now?" Harry asked.

"We do nothing," Snape replied. "You four will remain here, and I will play my way across the board. And when all this is quite finished, Harry, I will see to it that the four of you serve detentions for your entire second year."

Snape stepped forward, onto the board, and after careful consideration, took the place of a bishop, which left the board when he touched it. He waited patiently for white to move; nothing happened.

"Infuriating woman," Snape said, with feeling. "We all have to play."

Harry grinned at the others. "Where would you like us, Professor?" he called.

"Longbottom and Patil, rooks please -- no. Longbottom, take the end pawn in front of Miss Patil. Malfoy, queen-side knight. Harry..." Snape seemed to consider. "Here, next to me. The other knight."

As soon as the last piece had disappeared to the sidelines, replaced by Harry, a white pawn moved forward.

"Professor," Harry said hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"Do you even play chess?"

Snape smiled slightly. "Your trust in me can clearly move molehills, Har -- "

He nearly stumbled then, as something seemed to strike him in the head; Harry moved towards him as he pressed one hand to his temple, over the old scar-marks Peter had left on his face.

"No, don't move now -- you'll forfeit," Snape gasped. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, breathing deeply. Down the line, the other three looked terribly frightened.

"What's happened?" Harry asked, hearing the terror in his own voice.

Snape didn't answer; instead he called out an order, and one of the black pawns moved forward. Snape's ragged breathing filled the air as the white players seemed to consider, but by the time white had made its move, he was recovering from whatever spasm had shaken him.

"Who are we chasing, anyhow?" Padma asked, as she stepped forward on Snape's command.

"Quiet, Patil," Snape answered.

He gave an order which sent one of the pawns into danger. A white Knight swung at the pawn and shattered it with his lance, breaking it into tiny pieces. All four children stared wide-eyed as the wrecked pawn disappeared. After that none of them spoke.

Finally there came a long pause in the game, during which Snape appeared to be thinking especially hard. Harry had been playing chess since he

was eight, Padma since she was five; Neville knew how, but didn't enjoy it. Draco, never having had anyone to play with, hadn't learned until Hogwarts, but he'd proved an apt enough pupil and sometimes even managed to defeat Harry, if he focused hard enough.

"It's me," Draco said quietly.

"No," Snape replied sharply.

"You know it is. Sacrifice me and you'll have the king in two moves, it's the quickest way."

"I'm not going to let some fool invention of McGonagall's decapitate a student," Snape replied.

"I don't think it'll kill me," Draco said, uncertainly.

"Regardless -- Malfoy, don't you dare!"

But Draco had already moved on his own. A white rook, towering over him, thrust a stone out from its side and knocked him flat, violently.

"Draco!" Neville, heedless of Snape's order, stepped out of line to try and help his friend, and was tripped by a Knight, who thrust him violently back onto his square. There was a whimper of pain.

"Don't. Move." Snape's voice was like a whipcrack in the echoing chamber. Harry and Padma both nodded. "All right. Harry, forward, and take the bishop."

Harry stepped up to the white bishop and touched it; it turned at once and walked off the board.

"Doesn't seem fair, somehow," Padma murmured, staring at the two fallen boys -- Draco curled and huddling in the middle of the board, Neville gasping in pain over a deep cut on his leg.

"All right, Longbottom?" Snape called, as a white pawn moved forward in a desperate gambit to protect its king.

"All right, sir," Neville answered, though there were tears running down his cheeks. "Don't think I'm much good for walking."

"Serves you right. Miss Patil, four squares forward, please -- that's check and mate," Snape said, a trifle smugly. The white king toppled over backwards, shattering as he did so; the other pieces turned and walked off the board, vanishing into the darkness beyond it.

Snape immediately ran across the board, reaching Draco first; Harry and Padma bent over Neville, and Padma took one of Harry's shoe-socks, trying to stop the bleeding with it.

"Sorry it's not very hygienic," she said apologetically. Neville had buried his face in Harry's shirt, and was trembling.

"He's breathing -- I don't think he's hurt badly, merely unconscious," Snape said, bending over Draco. He picked him up, carefully, and carried him to where the other three were huddled. "I warned you it was dangerous," he said, laying Draco down next to Neville.

"I can heal your leg, but it will take time to repair itself. You'll be more of a hindrance than a help if we bring you along," he informed Neville, who nodded and braced himself. He whimpered a little when Snape's hands touched him, but after a moment he sagged with relief, and released his death grip on Harry's sleeve. The wound began, visibly but slowly, to heal itself.

"Patil, stay with them," he said. She gulped, and nodded. "If Malfoy comes round, keep him awake. Harry, come with me."

Harry rose obediently and followed Snape, picking his way over the rubble strewn the board. There was a door beyond the white king's square, and Snape ducked through it, walking swiftly down the long tunnel.

"Why did you bring me along?" Harry asked, voice hushed. Snape lifted a torch from the wall as he passed.

"Because if we die, they might be able to get free, and if I die you can at least send someone back for them," Snape replied.

"Who are we chasing? You said you thought you knew," Harry said, unwilling to ask what would happen if only he died.

"Quirrell," Snape said tightly.

"Professor Quirrell? But -- "

"I've known for some time that he's been after the stone," Snape said, pressing the back of his hand to his temple as he walked. "Mind the pit."

Harry jumped quickly around a deep hole in one side of the corridor.

"I should have gone to Dumbledore sooner, but I had no evidence. He would have laughed -- he would have called it bitterness."

"Bitterness?"

"Quirrell has my job," Snape answered. "It's no secret among the faculty that I've sought the Dark Arts position several years running."

"Several years in a row?"

"It's cursed, didn't you know?"

"Then why would you want it?"

"Because I have a right to it!" Snape snarled, though he didn't stop walking. "And the board of governors refuses me, year after year. They suspect me."

"Of what?"

"What does it matter? I consorted with the wrong type of person, and have since paid the price."

"Lucius Malfoy," Harry whispered. "You knew him."

"Knew him. Yes. That's one way to put it," Snape said, with a snort of wry laughter. "Young Mister Malfoy bears a striking resemblance to him. No self control, no sense of timing in the slightest."

"There wasn't any other way," Harry said. "I saw it too."

"I have been playing chess longer than you've been alive, Harry."

"There wasn't, though."

They emerged into a small room, and immediately both coughed and held their hands over their faces. A troll lay unconscious on the floor, snoring noisily.

"Quirrell's trap," Snape said, as Harry gagged and edged his way around the monster. The stench made his eyes water. "Brute force. Very much his way."

He gave a sharp tug on the door and shoved Harry through. When the door shut behind them Harry could finally breathe again, and he turned to see what new challenge awaited them.

"Ah," Snape said. "Almost over, then."

A row of bottles sat on a long table in front of them, from which hung a large sheet of paper with a poem on it in green ink. Purple fire roared up in the doorway behind them, and black flames in another one, beyond the table.

"This is my trap," Snape said, plucking up the smallest bottle as he spoke. "Unlike the unsubtle troll behind us, this relies on logic; something in short supply among wizards, as Longbottom proved. Drink," he said, holding it out to Harry. "Only half."

Harry stared at the potion for a moment, then sipped from the bottle. Snape upturned the rest into his own mouth as an icy sensation filled Harry.

"Walk quickly," Snape ordered, and Harry felt the Professor's hand on his shoulder as he stepped through the flame.

Remus woke from the dream with a yelp of panic, and almost fell off the bed. He caught himself on the nightstand, staggered upright, and stumbled into the bathroom, vomiting. Behind him, he heard Sirius call his name, sleepily.

"In here," he said, cupping his hand under the faucet and bringing the water to his mouth to rinse out the taste of bile. He became aware that he was still breathing heavily only when he saw Sirius in the mirror, resting a hand on his back between his shoulderblades.

"Are you all right?" Sirius asked softly. "Dinner not agree with you?"

"No -- " Remus drank another handful of water, then accepted the glass Sirius pressed into his hand, filling it as he spoke. "A nightmare. I didn't mean to wake you."

"A nightmare?" Sirius asked. "Or one of the dreams?"

Remus calmed himself, comforted by the warm weight of Sirius' hand on his back. After a minute's thought, he drank the water in the glass, and set it down so hard it cracked.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Accident. Listen, we have to floo Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore?" Sirius asked.

"The dream. Something's gone wrong at Hogwarts. Harry's in danger."

"Danger? But it's -- "

"Sirius, please," Remus said, turning towards the doorway and almost falling. Sirius caught him under the arm, hauling him upright. "We have to tell someone. Now."

"All right, we'll go use Andromeda's floo. Tell me what you saw," Sirius said, as he helped Remus out into the bedroom and then through the living room, down the stairs to the flat on the floor below them.

"I didn't see it -- I was reading a letter -- from Dumbledore," Remus said. "It said that Harry'd been in an accident the night before -- that Peter had hurt him, and killed another student, that Harry was unconscious. Something's happening right now, tonight."

Sirius eased him into a chair, worry in every line of his face.

"I'm not hysterical," Remus insisted.

"I didn't say you were," Sirius replied, turning to light a flame in the empty fireplace. He threw a handful of floo powder into the fire and said, "Dumbledore" and then the old passcode, "Order Business," when it flared up slightly. He put his head into the fireplace and barked, "Dumbledore! Wake up!"

Remus, shakily, slid to the floor next to him, and joined him in the flame. He could see Dumbledore's bedchamber, dim and dark, and a figure sitting up on the bed.

"Who's that?" Dumbledore's voice, hoarse with sleep, called out.

"Sirius Black," Sirius called. "Remus is here too. He's had a dream."

Dumbledore rose and crouched on the hearthstones of his own fireplace. "A dream, my boy?"

"There isn't time to explain," Remus said. "Harry's in danger, possibly another student as well."

"Danger? At this time of night?"

"I don't know how, but he is," Remus insisted. "I'm coming through."

Dumbledore looked as though he were about to protest, but he sat back on his heels, giving them enough room to pass through the floo and onto his hearthstones. When they arrived, ash swirling around them, he stood and straightened the night-cap on his head.

"Now, what's all this about students in danger?" he asked.

"Something's happening. Tonight. Peter Pettigrew's involved somehow," Sirius said quickly.

"Pettigrew? Here?"

"Ask Snape," Remus said. "He'll believe us. He can check the dormitory and see if Harry's in bed."

Dumbledore, dubiously, put his head back into the fireplace and called Snape's name. After a moment, he stepped back.

"He's not in his rooms or office," he said quietly. Sirius, at the end of his rope, grabbed the headmaster by the front of his sleeping-robcs.

"Where's he taken him?" he demanded.

Dumbledore's eyes flicked down to the hands grasping his clothing, then back up at Sirius' face. Sirius released him, suddenly, as though he'd been burned.

"I do not know where Professor Snape is, but undoubtedly he has his own reasons for being absent," Dumbledore said. "I -- "

He paused, then, and a thoughtful look crossed his face.

"Come with me," he said.

They followed him as he fetched up a dressing-gown off a chair and padded barefoot into his circular office, where a peculiar tray, oblong and apparently made of dark wood, rested near his desk. He waved his hand over it, and a series of walls grew up from the tray, along with what looked like the remains of a smashed chessboard, a tiny flock of birds, and a small planter, among other things.

"For the past year we have been protecting, at the request of Nicolas Flamel -- "

"Your old partner?" Remus asked.

"Indeed. The Philosopher's Stone. He intended to destroy it at the summer solstice, and until that time we felt strict security measures were necessary. Devil's Snare, a charmed lock and key, a chessb -- "

Dumbledore stopped, and peered down at the chessboard. A trio of small, lifelike dolls were huddled on one off-centre square.

"Dear me," he murmured. "It looks as though several students have attempted to break through...come with me."

"I want to know -- "

"Do as I say, if you value your godson's life."

Sirius looked stricken, and allowed Dumbledore to lead them to a paneled wall. One of the paintings obediently swung open at his request to reveal a small cubbyhole containing a gold flask; he took it and stepped in front of the panel next to it, which drew back entirely.

They followed the headmaster down a spiral staircase that seemed to go on forever; they stopped, around the time Remus estimated they'd just passed ground level, and Dumbledore unlocked a door with a small, complicated key he produced from around his neck.

"It is as I feared," he said, when he opened the door.

On the other side of the flame, Harry found, was a wide staircase leading down to a large, echoing chamber. In the centre of the chamber stood a mirror and two men, examining it, one tall and one short. Before he could help himself, he'd sucked in a startled breath -- that was the mirror called Y N I T S E D, and he could see the rolling fog inside it from where he stood.

A hand clapped over his mouth as soon as he'd made the noise -- Snape's hand, as the professor came through the flame behind him. Too late, however; the taller man in front of the mirror had turned.

Professor Quirrell's arm shot out, wand pointed directly at Harry's forehead.

"Move and you die," he said. "You move, Snape, and the boy suffers."

"Let him go, Quirrell," Snape said. Harry's eyes were on the other figure, who was pressing his hands to the golden stand, as if exploring it -- leaving small smears of red wherever he touched, apparently ignoring the standoff going on nearby.

"So he can sound the alarm? I think not," Quirrell replied. "Besides, he'll be needed, eventually."

Snape's fingers tightened over Harry's mouth.

"Needed for what?" he demanded.

"Just a little spell you once interrupted," answered a horrible, rasping voice, the voice of the other man in the room, who straightened and turned around.

"Pettigrew," Snape breathed.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 18

"Sniveheellus," Peter Pettigrew said. "Sohh good to see you haa...gain."

Harry's eyes widened, and if Snape's hand on his mouth hadn't reminded him to be silent, he might have screamed.

Pettigrew stood next to Quirrell, just in front of the mirror, shoulders slightly hunched. His presence alone made Harry want to bolt for cover, made all the horrifying memories of the kidnapping come rolling back to him -- he and Dora, imprisoned and taunted by Bellatrix, forced to watch as Pettigrew completed the ritual that would grant him immense power. The fight afterwards, and the snakes....

The snakes. His first Snake, who'd had his back broken protecting Harry. The snakes had done something horrible to him, Harry realised.

Pettigrew's face, with its curious goat's-eyes, was a mass of what had at first looked like open sores. Now Harry saw them for what they were: old open gashes from snake bites, still leaking little dribbles of blood once in a while. They covered face and neck, even up into his dull, patchy hair. His mangled lips and even part of his tongue made it a horror to watch him talk.

There were bloodstains on the shapeless dun robe he wore, and his hands were thick and swollen with bites, with blood, with infections here and there. Somehow the snakes had done this -- had torn him nearly to shreds, and he hadn't healed.

"Oh, gods," Snape said.

"Ahhrrm't you pleheased to scheee me?" Pettigrew rasped. "Yhou've grown, Harrh...eey."

Harry stared at him, horrified. Behind them, the smoke boiled in the mirror.

"Make sense to you now, Severus?" Quirrell asked. His voice was lower than usual, and the stutter was completely gone; his face was composed and cold. "The deaths of the unicorns, the troll, my motives? You can see why I wouldn't give you a reason before."

"I knew it wasn't just greed," Snape muttered. "You're a fool, Quirrell."

"A fool?" Quirrell snickered. "It may have taken me longer than you to discover my way to this chamber, but I am here as you are. Does a fool apprentice himself to a powerful dark wizard? Become his right hand?"

"You've been fooled by a ruthless murderer," Snape replied. There was a rasping, choking noise of disapproval from Pettigrew.

"Puhut the wand dow...hng," Pettigrew said. "Ahnd let me show Suhnivellus how ruthless I...cahn be."

Quirrell hesitated, but eventually he spun the wand and tucked it back into a pocket in his robes. Pettigrew reached up to touch his own temple, and Snape would have pitched forward if Harry hadn't been there. As it was they stumbled, and Snape fell to his knees at the top of the stairs, clutching the scar on his face. Harry bent over him.

"Stop it!" he shouted, as Snape struggled to breathe. "Stop it!"

Pettigrew smiled cruelly, and let his hand fall. Snape slumped forward, unconscious.

"Cohme....hereh, Harry," Pettigrew ordered.

"Come here or he dies," Quirrell added, when Harry gave them both a defiant look. "And let me tell you a little story about my master."

Harry could feel his own wand in his back pocket, but there was no way to reach for it and he had no idea what he would do with it if he could. He descended the stairs slowly and warily. Quirrell stepped directly up to him and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, teacher-fashion. Harry suppressed a shudder.

All year while he had sat in Quirrell's class, while he had received grades, answered questions, been praised and occasionally scolded by the professor, Quirrell had been serving Peter Pettigrew. The traitor who had in turn served Voldemort.

"My Master, you see, found me," he whispered, "and asked for my care. How could I say no? My poor Master," he added, turning to look at Peter, who had gone back to examining the mirror. "We tried unicorn's blood, but that only keeps him alive; it doesn't heal his wounds. Wounds you caused," he added, a brief flash of anger crossing his face. "But I know the Elixir of Life can cure him. And so," he said, "we must find the stone."

"It's not here," Harry said loudly.

"Not yet," Quirrell agreed.

There was a deep breath from the top of the stairs, and Snape pushed himself up, just barely.

"You'll never get it," he said hoarsely.

"Tell me how to get it out of the mirror or the boy dies," Quirrell replied.

"You won't kill him," Snape answered. "You..." he wheezed. "You need him. To find..." another choking breath, "The Dark Lord."

"Then you tell us or you die," Quirrell snapped. Snape gave him a ghastly smile.

"The Mirror of Ynitsed," Snape answered. "Unless you're...destined to have the stone...you'll never get it."

Quirrell turned to look at Pettigrew, and Harry made a move for his wand -- but Quirrell's hand shot out and caught his wrist, though the tall man didn't even look at him. Pettigrew gestured him over clumsily with one swollen hand, and Quirrell dragged Harry with him.

What the billowing mirror-smoke showed Quirrell, Harry never found out; he was torn between closing his eyes tightly and looking at whatever horror it had to show him. Pettigrew, shaking his head, pointed a finger at the mirror.

"I see mh...yself whole," he rasped, and Snape let out a small groan of despair behind them. Harry could hear him dragging himself along the ground, towards the stairs. "S...erving mhy mha....ster..."

"Lord Voldemort," Quirrell said, in a reverent whisper. Harry, watching the smoke move faster and faster, waited for the first vision in the mirror to appear. He didn't notice Pettigrew until the man's head snapped up, and he scented the air, nostrils twitching like a bloodhound.

"Bhoy," he said, and Harry's eyes jerked away from the mirror. "Him. His destiny to get the stone."

Quirrell jerked aside, holding Harry in a viselike grip in front of the mirror. The smoke reached fever pitch and cleared; Harry braced for another horrible sight, but all he saw was --

Himself. Uninjured except for a few scratches he'd gotten during the battle with the Devil's Snare. Behind him, he could see Quirrell --

No. Not Quirrell. A ghastly impersonation of Quirrell, sunken-cheeked, grey-faced, eyes rolled up in his head, the whites tinted strangely green. Quirrell's corpse.

On the other side, Peter Pettigrew, whole and rosy-cheeked, smiling horribly.

The mirror-Harry gave him a little smile and held out his other hand, balled into a fist. When he opened it, a small red stone lay on his palm.

It looks so plain, Harry thought. It looked like a smooth river-stone -- pretty enough, but nothing special.

Then the mirror-Harry stepped forward, and his hand, his arm, came out of the mirror as though it were nothing more than a spiderweb or a sheet of thin paper. Quirrell, triumphantly, reached for the stone, but his hand passed right through it; Pettigrew tried a second later, with the same results.

"He has to take it," Quirrell said. Harry was hardly listening; he could see Snape, in the mirror, reach the bottom of the stairs, and roll over onto his back, breathing hard. He was reaching for his wand.

"Take the stone, Harry," Quirrell ordered, grasping him by the hair, forcing him forward.

"I won't," Harry protested, trying to pull away.

"Ta...hake the stone or Snivellus dies," Pettigrew snapped, as much as he could around the peculiar gasping speech impediment.

"Don't do it, Harry," Snape called, but Harry had already reached out and taken the stone from his mirror-image's hand. The moment he did, smoke blew across the mirror for a split second, and everything changed. Even Snape, on his knees behind them, looked different, though Harry couldn't say how. Quirrell's face was beginning to decay, now, and Pettigrew's horrible, unnatural eyes had changed colour, had turned pure white, and something was wrapping its way around his neck --

Harry was thrown away, skidding backwards towards Snape. Quirrell produced a jar from under his robes, filled with a silvery powder, and held it out to his master. Pettigrew dropped the stone into the jar, and the powder began to move, as though it was full of worms, or somehow alive.

"Harry," Snape whispered. "Get out. Go back through the flame, it won't hurt you. I'm sorry."

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry said, trying to help prop him up.

"If you don't go now you won't have another chance -- Merlin fuck," he swore, as Pettigrew gave them a swift glance, and the scars on his face glowed.

"They won't kill you if they've got me," Harry replied. "Someone'll come."

"Nobody's...coming, Harry," Snape managed. "Get out now."

"No."

There was an hysterical laugh, and both of them looked up; Pettigrew had filled the jar with water and was drinking it, with the stone still inside. Quirrell was laughing, applauding delightedly and slightly insanely.

"Is that all?" Harry asked in a whisper.

"Sublimely simple," Snape answered.

"One draught to cure," Pettigrew said, wiping his lips as he finished. His wounds were already sealing over, and when he wiped blood off his face, they could see clean, whole skin underneath. "And one draught to -- "

"Expelliarmus!" Snape shouted as his wand shot out. The jar went flying; there was the sound of breaking glass in the shadows, and they could hear the stone skittering away.

"You never could manage to be anything more than an annoyance, Snivellus," Pettigrew snarled, gaining coherency as the wounds on his throat and mouth healed. "I can live without immortality for a minute or two, in order to take care of you."

He started forward, but Quirrell cried "Master!" and he turned. Quirrell was staring in the mirror, touching his face. Furious, Quirrell whirled on Snape.

"Let me kill him," he said softly. Pettigrew hesitated, but then smiled cruelly, and waved his hand.

"Be my guest," he said. Harry tried to slide in front of his professor, but Snape shoved him away.

"Will you stand, Snivellus?" Pettigrew asked, sneeringly. "Take your death like a man?"

Snape pushed himself upright, drew his feet up under him and stood, swaying unsteadily. He lifted his wand.

"This is your last chance, Quirrell," he said quietly, waveringly.

"Did you hear that?" Pettigrew said, with a sinister smile creasing his now-smooth face. The last of the blood, drying on his skin, flaked and fell away. "He's given you a last chance."

"Very kind of him," Quirrell agreed. "But I doubt," he added, turning back to Snape, "that you have enough energy left for a simple summoning charm. And so, I think -- "

"Avada Kedavra," Snape said, calmly. Harry was blown backwards by the blast, which slammed him into the steps and knocked the breath from his body. Green light filled the room, and Quirrell was thrown into the mirror, which shattered splendidly. Snape turned to Pettigrew.

"Never give a man time to pool his resources, rat," he said, just as Pettigrew lifted a shaking hand and pointed at him. The scars glowed bright amber again, and Snape collapsed completely.

Harry threw himself forward, willing to scratch those goat's eyes out of Pettigrew's face, but an arm caught him around his chest, and two men darted past him from behind. Before Harry could think, let alone react, Sirius was there, running for Pettigrew, who snapped his outstretched fingers and vanished just before Sirius reached him. Dumbledore, on his other side, was already bending over Snape.

"It's all right, Harry," Remus said in his ear. "It's okay, we're here."

Harry looked down and realised that the arm around his chest was wearing Remus' favourite red pyjama shirt. He glanced up, and saw Remus' worried face. Sirius, standing where Pettigrew had been, bellowed in rage.

"He's still alive," Dumbledore said. Harry felt himself trembling, despite Remus' protective embrace. "Sirius, stop being a fool. See to Quirrell."

Sirius knelt, wary of the shattered glass, where the other man lay.

"He's dead," he said, voice shaking. "Someone's used an Unforgiveable on him."

Just then Snape began to cough, and Dumbledore helped him to roll over. He dry-heaved twice, spat, and tried to push himself to his feet once more.

"Now is not the time," Dumbledore said, when he saw Sirius open his mouth, "to ask questions. Someone must go back through to the room with the potions, and drink the smallest but one. Pass through the purple flame and find the other children. Help them through and we'll all go up to the hospital wing, quietly and calmly, together."

Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who was helping Snape to walk, and buried his face in Remus' shirt. Now that it was over, he felt weak, as though he could hardly move; after a moment there were other arms, and the sharp, clean smell of Sirius, who was lifting him, carrying him back through the black flame, towards safety.

Severus Snape woke slowly, to sensations rather than a concrete world: throbbing pain in his jaw and one of his wrists, bright white colour, noise. He lay still, unsure where he was or if awake was quite a safe thing to be; slowly the world resolved itself into a pillow under his head, white flannel pyjama trousers, a hospital blanket on his bare chest, something wrapped around his wrist. And words -- voices.

"And Draco?"

"He'll be all right. The chesspieces were designed to be malicious, not murderous, and aside from a nasty bump on his head, he's healing nicely. I'm told Madam Pomfrey's feeding him ice cream."

Severus felt a relief he wasn't sure he understood, since why wouldn't Malfoy be all right?

"What about...the body."

"Quirrell? You heard Harry. It sounds to me as though he got what he deserved."

The second voice, the one answering questions, that was Dumbledore; it took him a minute more to identify the first as Lupin.

"Sirius is with him now," Lupin said.

"I imagine he is being a very solicitous parent."

"Yes, well. As soon as he's made sure Harry has all his fingers and toes still, you should probably prepare yourself for a shouting match."

A pang of amusement shot through Severus. That would be Black, always trying to shout down whoever disagreed with him.

"You aren't shouting, I notice."

"I've found there's rarely any need for it. Especially after the fact."

"You aren't angry that Harry was endangered thus?"

"From the sound of it he endangered himself, and Severus hadn't much choice. It's quite clear he put Harry's interests above his own."

The memories came rushing back, at that point, and Severus moaned. Yes; he had cast an Avada Kedavra to protect Harry. Something he had done only once before, and once had been more than enough to put the fear of a punishment in the afterlife into him.

He was in a world of trouble. Worlds. Many, many worlds of trouble. An entire solar system of trouble.

"Looks like he's coming round," said Lupin, and Severus shifted on the bed. An arm snaked under his shoulder, and Lupin helped him to sit upright, although he nearly pitched forward from the vertigo. He rested for a moment, while the other two were silent, and then drew up his knees, setting his arms across them and resting his forehead on his arms, taking deep breaths.

"Harry's all right?" he asked, just to be sure.

"He's fine. Just a few bruises," Lupin answered.

"Malfoy and the others?"

"Almost better than Harry," Dumbledore said. "Mister Longbottom and Miss Patil are keeping Mister Malfoy company while he recuperates in a more private room."

"The stone?"

"Recovered. Unfortunately we've had to...disable some of the security surrounding it, but several Aurors have already arrived to take personal custody, and are arranging new measures until it can be destroyed."

"Pettigrew."

"Gone."

"He'll be back."

"The wards have already gone up," Dumbledore answered, and Severus turned his head to one side to look at them. "He came in with help, and he left through magic, but he won't be able to get back in either way."

Severus nodded, and turned back to contemplating the sheets. It was a relief not to have to think too much.

"You haven't asked about Quirrell," Dumbledore said gently.

"I don't need to."

There was a long silence, and footfalls could be heard at the far end of the infirmary room.

"Harry's sleeping in the next room." Black's voice. "I've asked Nymphadora to stand guard outside the hospital wing with her partner."

"The school is perfectly safe," Dumbledore answered.

"Forgive me, Headmaster, if I don't have much faith in your ability to protect my son," Sirius answered sharply.

"Here comes the shouting," Lupin murmured. Severus let out a weak, dry chuckle.

"Let us discuss this in my office," Dumbledore said, "away from those who need their rest."

When they had gone, Severus lifted his head and looked around. Sunlight filtered through the windows; he must have been unconscious for hours. It had already been past midnight when the whole mess had begun, and if he could see the sun through the high rose window at one end, that meant it was at least past ten in the morning.

Quirrell dead -- he didn't regret that much, he'd never liked the man, and anyone who hurt Harry deserved to die. Pettigrew healed and escaped -- no doubt he would begin causing trouble soon enough. He'd had no idea Pettigrew was even involved, or how the man had latched on to the Philosopher's Stone as a cure for the perpetual injuries -- or even why those had occurred. It wasn't as though a charm had been cast. He had simply been ripped to shreds by snakes, acting on Harry's command two years before. Two years of life like that must have been torture.

Well. Severus had never liked Pettigrew either.

The Mirror of Ynited had shattered. That was just as well. Severus didn't trust centaur magic, and the thing was centaur forged; still, it would create an imbalance --

"Professor Snape?"

He looked over at the doorway, and found Harry standing there uncertainly, clad in hospital-issue pyjamas.

"You should be sleeping," he said to Harry, by way of greeting.

"I was tired," Harry answered truthfully. "But Sirius went a little insane about me getting hurt. I pretended to go to sleep so he'd go yell at Dumbledore instead of yelling about Dumbledore to me."

"Just about Dumbledore?" Severus asked. Harry came forward into the room, wandering slowly down the aisle created by the facing beds.

"And you too," Harry answered. "He wants you sacked."

"How charitable of him. I probably deserve imprisonment."

"Cos you killed Professor Quirrell."

"Not just because I killed him; that was self-defence. It was the manner in which I did so. That spell's forbidden; it's an Unforgiveable curse."

Harry sat on the edge of the next bed over. He didn't ask how Severus knew the curse.

"I told them Peter Pettigrew did it."

Severus stared at him.

"You what, Harry?"

"I told them he did it. Killed Quirrell. They believed me."

"Harry, why did you lie?"

Harry shrugged. "Cos you'd have been in trouble if they knew you'd killed him, and you didn't deserve to be. 'Sides, I'm a Slytherin. Everyone keeps telling me we're supposed to cheat."

Severus considered this. The boy had a point. In Harry's place, had he been quick-witted enough, he'd have done the same.

"That was all right, wasn't it?" Harry asked.

"You may have saved my life," Severus said quietly.

"Good," said Harry, decidedly. He glanced down at his hands. "Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Padma was sure that you were the one who was after the stone. She made a good case for it," Harry continued. "I mean. Who wouldn't want to live forever with all the gold they could ever need?"

Severus watched him for a while before replying.

"Wizards," he said, after a moment, "Witches and Wizards, both, usually live well into their second century. One forgets this, as...so many of those who would still be alive, like Dumbledore, have died. Many in the last war, with the rise of the Dark Lord. The Headmaster is himself well over a hundred years old."

"He looks it," Harry said. Severus smiled thinly.

"Pray you age as well as he has, Harry, or that you are permitted to live long enough to do so. We already witness so much in our lives; I have no desire to live beyond my allotted span. There was a time when I cursed that I had even as much time as I did to live."

Harry gave him a curious look, and Severus realised he'd said more than he ought; he changed the subject quickly.

"As for the fact of the stone turning lead -- or any other metal -- into gold..." he shook his head. "It's a question of economics. Too much gold and the value drops. Beyond that, I've always found it to be a rather gaudy metal."

"But you could quit your job. You hate teaching."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Hate teaching? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You're always shouting at someone or telling us our marks aren't good enough, or you're refusing to give us the answers to the homework until we've worked it out ourselves..." Harry trailed off, blinking.

"Tell me, Harry, do you consider...say, Professor Binns to be kinder than I?" Harry refused to answer, but Severus already knew. "And whose class do you work harder in?"

"Yours," Harry mumbled.

"Why?"

"Because it's harder to please you."

Severus nodded. "When I was sixteen I surely never imagined this is where I would be at thirty-two, but I think perhaps I ought to be grateful for that. I don't want to live forever. And even if I had, I would not have gone against Dumbledore's wishes. I do try not to betray those who have placed their faith in me," he mused. "Besides, someone has to ensure competence amongst the students. In my class, you know, you learn more than just potions-brewing."

Harry gave him a troubled look, but he didn't speak; after a while, Severus closed his eyes.

"You could've died," Harry said.

"That's very true. So could you, considering your idiotic refusal to go to safety."

"But he didn't kill you," Harry answered, ignoring the scolding. "He didn't kill you, but when Professor Quirrell dared you to kill him, you did."

"Peter Pettigrew is arrogant, and stupid. He has power for the sake of power and no idea how to wield it; he desires an audience. I..." he sighed. "We all desire an audience, some more than others, but the difference is, some of us are not proud of our atrocities."

"Are you glad you killed him?"

"Yes."

"Me too. I hope they don't sack you. It had to happen."

"Oh?" Severus asked, amused at his childish confidence.

"When I looked in the mirror..." Harry hesitated. "I saw what was going to happen. Sort of. I mean I saw him -- " Severus noticed with a start that Harry never said Pettigrew's name, if he could help it, " -- healed again. And I saw me, and I was okay, and you were -- well, not really okay, but you weren't dead. And Professor Quirrell was. I don't think I liked that mirror much."

"Destiny's tricky," Severus agreed. "It changes with our decisions. The mirror only shows what might happen, and never even shows that very

clearly. Which makes sense," he added. "It's just like the centaurs that made it."

"Will they be angry you broke it?"

"Immensely. It was part of a set of mirrors, and their magic was interlaced; without one, the others may become...unstable."

The Erebus mirrors, he thought -- the mirrors that saw into the outer darkness. Ynitsed, Erised, and Noitoved. Without Ynitsed, the other two might have to be destroyed as well. The centaurs would be furious.

Damn.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," said a new voice, and they turned to see Dora Tonks watching them from the doorway, arms crossed. "Nearly gave me a heart attack when I went to look in on you and you weren't there, Harry."

Harry rose, reluctantly, and let her tousle his hair as he passed back into the private room Madam Pomfrey had given him.

"You all right then?" she asked, and Severus realised she was talking to him.

"Fine, thank you."

"I heard about Quirrell."

"Oh?"

"Yeah -- word is, Peter Pettigrew murdered him in order to distract you while he made his getaway."

Their eyes met for a long moment, and then she winked. "My parents send their love," she said, and vanished into Harry's room.

He sat for a long time, watching the fall of light through the stained-glass window, collecting up his thoughts and deciding what to do with them; it was a process he'd learned from an old teacher. To turn over one's thoughts, decide upon one's emotions, and set them aside in a corner of the mind; it was necessary.

He had been arrogant and stupid, perhaps even more so than Peter Pettigrew. He should have gone to Dumbledore after Quirrell released the troll; he had rationalised to himself that Dumbledore would scoff at him, but Dumbledore never scoffed. The truth, and this cut to the bone because it meant that he was indirectly responsible for the childrens' injuries, was that he had wanted the glory of catching Quirrell in the act -- or he had wanted a triumph over Quirrell. That was it; he had wanted to beat the man at his own game.

There would be no publicity about this, whether he had played the hero or the villain in it; Dumbledore would never allow the scandal of a teacher's murder to be published. The Minister would have to be informed, but publicly Quirrell's death would be chalked up to something else -- an unfortunate adventure in the Forbidden Forest, perhaps. The stone would still be destroyed on the solstice, and if Draco's mother was even informed of the accident, which he doubted would happen, she would be told he had tumbled down some stairs, or been fighting with another boy.

The rest of the children would know; Neville Longbottom was indiscreet. But they would only know half-stories and probably embellish those into myths that had so little bearing on reality that they were safe, for now.

He would be called to testify in front of the Minister on the subject of Pettigrew's misadventure with the stone, and he would have to uphold Harry's lie about Quirrell's death. It was a good lie, a lie he was grateful for. He had been Harry's secret-keeper for two years; Harry could keep one of his.

He was so tired.

Madam Pomfrey, having assured herself that Draco Malfoy had enough company to keep him awake until the concussion wore off, and having seen Harry sleeping safely in bed, found her oldest and least compliant patient asleep when she checked on him. It was just as well; Sirius Black had only just stopped his furious tirade, and Severus would only have provided a second target.

Laocoon's Children - The Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 19

Slytherin played Ravenclaw in the week following the end of exams, three days after the misadventures of the children and Professor Snape; Harry, sore but eager, was allowed to participate only after Severus joined the fray, because Albus Dumbledore was far too pleased by the sight of Sirius Black and Severus Snape arguing the same side to deny them the pleasure of seeing Harry play.

Severus, who after three days was still feeling ill and whose heart made noises that mildly worried Madam Pomfrey, was only barely allowed to attend the game on the condition that he be accompanied by the Healer and obey her mandates absolutely. Madam Rosmerta, a Hogsmeade resident and friend of Dumbledore's, was asked to grade his students' papers and give them their marks, and the results were therefore rather more lenient --and butterbeer-spotted -- than his students would have expected.

The day of the game was sunny and warm, and perfect, because Slytherin won; Sirius even caved and wore a green shirt, though he made up for it by wearing scarlet wizarding robes over it. Still, the spirit of the thing counted.

The children, who had missed out on the joy of seeing their Gryffindor prank victims discomfited at breakfast, were heartened by the way Neville's former bullies avoided their eyes, and sat hunkered in a corner of the stadium, occasionally scratching at the ink under their shirts. The solitary girl, whose shoes had been vandalised by Padma, had received a Howler from her parents, demanding to know why she wanted yet more shoes. Revenge was sweet, and also apparently effective.

It was the day after the game, and the day before exam scores came out (Draco already knew he'd passed Transfig, and Padma had been quietly informed she'd set the record for first-year Charms scores) when Harry was called into the Headmaster's office, to find Remus, Sirius, and Dora waiting there for him.

"Harry, please be seated, if you would," Dumbledore said gravely, and Harry settled himself on the empty chair between Sirius and Remus. "I'm afraid I have some rather serious and unpleasant news I'm obliged to share."

Harry waited patiently. If he had been found out in his lie, there was nothing to be done about it now; if he was being punished, the adventure had been well worth it.

"Having ascertained that Peter Pettigrew is now at the height of what power he has," Dumbledore said slowly, "it has been decided that London is no longer a safe haven, even the excellent protection of the Tonks house."

Dumbledore nodded at Dora, who looked unusually grave -- even her normal pink-or-blue hair had settled into a sober shade of dark brown.

"To return to London, especially a house easily accessible through Diagon Alley, would endanger not only yourself but also the Tonkses and Mister Longbottom. Unfortunately, therefore, we have agreed that a return to Betwys Beddau is wisest."

Harry watched two months' worth of summer plans go straight to hell.

"I know this must be a disappointment," Dumbledore said, "But we do think it is best."

There was a soft snort from Sirius which told Harry that Dumbledore's definition of "we" was different from Sirius'.

"We're taking you this afternoon," Remus said, "As soon as you can pack your things."

"This afternoon?" Harry demanded. "But I haven't had my exam scores yet -- nobody's leaving for days!"

"Which is precisely why you must leave now," Dumbledore said, in that infuriatingly reasonable tone. "You'll be allowed time to say goodbye to your friends, pack properly, and collect your scores."

"But I -- "

"This is not negotiable, Harry."

Harry glanced at Sirius, whose face was set with the determination of a man who is going to follow orders he thinks are idiotic, and then at Remus, who looked more regretful than anything.

"We've already moved back to the River House, Harry," Remus said. "The decision was made the day after everything happened."

"But I won't even be able to send letters to my friends -- they won't be able to send me anything -- " Harry stammered, as the impact of Betwys Beddau's isolation hit him fully. "This sucks."

He thought he heard a half-laugh from Dora, but when he glared at her, her face was fully composed.

"Regardless, it is what must be done to ensure your safety and the safety of your family," Dumbledore answered. "Pettigrew is unaware of the location of the house, or even where in the world you will be; it is the safest place for you until you can return here."

Harry scowled, but there was nothing to be done; after some of the usual farewell pleasantries, Remus and Sirius went to wait in the library with Dora, while Harry packed and said his goodbyes.

He had done quite a bit of packing already, in anticipation of taking the train home with the other students; now "home" would be the windswept Welsh town of Betwys Beddau, full of standing stones and Muggle children. Nobody to play Exploding Snap or Wizard's Chess with except for Remus and Sirius; nobody who knew what Hogwarts was. He wouldn't get to visit Padma's house or have living-room-sleepovers with Neville like they'd plotted. No camping out in Dora's old tent that she'd charmed with shooting stars on the inside roof.

Neville could still have Draco to stay, but he wouldn't get to be there, and he was sure if it was just Neville pestering his parents and not the combined forces of two boys, Draco wouldn't get to stay for nearly as long.

No letters. No visits to Diagon Alley. No wizarding sweets for three. Whole. Months.

A little voice inside him said it was really only two months and a week, but Harry could not be bothered to be logical at a time like this. He paused as he picked up the box he kept his cloak in -- Padma had thoughtfully stuffed it into a pocket of her robes and returned it to Harry after the whole mess was finished.

At least, he thought, his parents were sane. He'd be allowed to run more or less wild in Betwys Beddau, and Sirius never scolded if he spent hours in the garden that led down to the river, reading or drawing or just daydreaming.

Not like Draco. Going home would be even worse for Draco.

His friends were waiting for him as he came up the stairs out of the dungeons, bookbag over his shoulder -- the house-elves had already appeared to take his trunk to the train station. No doubt Dumbledore had summoned the other children as soon as Harry had left.

Padma, who looked upset, didn't say anything; she just hugged him and pressed a sack of fizzing whizbees in his hand (she'd obviously thought over the Wizarding Sweets Dilemma as well). Neville said it was awful, and shook his hand, promising to write him letters anyway and they'd find some way to smuggle them to him. Draco put out his hand to shake as well, and Harry, instead, put a box into it.

"S'my cloak," he muttered. Draco frowned. "You should have it. On account of your mum. So you can hide really well if you have to."

"I haven't got anywhere to hide it," Draco answered. "Well, I have, but what if she takes it away?"

"Don't let her," Harry said simply. "Or give it to the house-elves, they'll keep it safe. Take good care of it. It belonged to my dad."

Draco, still frowning, held the box against his chest and nodded. Sirius appeared, then, and he had to say goodbye once more, and shake all round, and stow the sweets in his pocket, and then it was time to leave.

None of the grown-ups spoke until they were on the train, Remus and Dora on the seat opposite, Sirius next to the window with his arm slung around Harry's shoulders.

"We'll transfer just outside London, and continue on Muggle transport," Sirius said finally. "It's a long trip, but we've got a sleeper reserved on the Muggle train, and when we reach Powys we'll take broomsticks from there. The train's crammed with Aurors -- "

"Five or six," Dora added.

" -- and we'll be at the River House tomorrow afternoon."

Harry nodded, and watched the landscape pass.

"We've arranged your room already," Remus said. "On the bright side, you won't have to help us move -- we did all that beforehand."

Sirius said something about the trouble moving, and Remus went off into a story about it; Harry, half-listening, closed his eyes and tried not to think about three months without magic, or his friends, or anyone who knew anything at all about Hogwarts.

On the other hand, he thought, he was alive, which was something. And he would have three months in Betwys Beddau, which was sunny in the summertime and did have brilliant rocks for climbing on.

"Oh," Sirius said, and dislodged Harry for a minute to dig in his pocket. "Dumbledore said this was for you."

Harry took the letter with a small thrill; it might have come from Dumbledore, but the green ink reading Harry on the outside was in Professor Snape's handwriting.

Harry,

Having been informed of the decision to return you to the River House for your holidays, I thought it would be better to write to you than to say

goodbye in person, as your time is better spent packing and preparing for the journey. By the time you receive this I will be already on my way to another part of the country for my health, so you see we are both under summer orders.

Enclosed you will find your official Hogwarts letter stating that you are not to use your magic at all outside of term time. You will also find your exam scores for this year's classes; they are adequate enough for an ordinary child, but I shall expect better of you next year. Mister Flint has informed me that your performance as Seeker was satisfactory, and that you will be returning to play for Slytherin House in the fall. As you will not be allowed broomstick flight until your return, I expect you to diligently study the playbook that Mister Flint provided you with at the beginning of your tenure on the team, and to compose at least five new stragetetic plays.

I anticipate that you will, as all my students do, forget everything you have learned this year. I have therefore composed a reading list that will remind you of the basics, if nothing more. They are books easily acquired in Muggle bookshops or already in the possession of your dubious godfather, and you will be examined on their contents when you return to Hogwarts.

Do try to stay out of trouble. I didn't risk my life so that you could be killed by a stray Muggle automobile over holidays.

I remain your professor,
Severus Snape

Fell, Bethany. "Herbology Basics"
Friede, Emily. "Magical Portraiture, a Guide for Beginners"
Juniper, Katrina. "The Boy Who Lived: A Biography"
Lockhart, Gilderoy. "Wandering with Werewolves" (for absurdity value.)
Schaeffer, Taisma. "Things That Creep"
Shelley, Mary. "Frankenstein"
Taylor & Tandy's "Elements Of Style"
White, T.H. "The Once and Future King"

Harry passed the second sheet of parchment to Sirius, who grinned and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Harry, look at this. Ninety-seven in Potions, ninety in Charms, ninety-four in Transfigurations -- these are great scores! Look, Remus, a hundred in Magical History -- "

"Eighty-four in Astronomy?" Remus asked, examining the scores.

"I kept falling asleep," Harry said.

"That's his lowest score, though -- full marks in Herbology as well, ninety-five in Defence -- "

"Ought to have given you a hundred, all things considered," Remus said, with a grin at Harry. "I think surviving a year of classes with a homicidal lunatic counts for something."

"Snape didn't give him full marks for surviving his," Sirius said, and Harry gave him a good-natured scowl.

"Dumbledore added a note saying your friend Padma took top of first-year, tied with Hermione Granger -- what an awful name to give a child -- and Neville and Draco both passed somewhere in the middle of their class," Remus said.

"What's the letter say?" Sirius asked.

Harry folded it and tucked it into his pocket. "Nothing, just some summer reading I have to do."

Betwys Beddau wasn't going to be so bad, after all.

END