

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 1 – The Invisible Family Member

Harry Potter could be very quiet — and still, which was lucky because right at the minute he was under his Invisibility Cloak, spying on his Aunt Petunia and hoping the telephone would ring again. He wouldn't ordinarily give a toss about his aunt's social life but for four words, fiercely whispered, still ringing in his ears, "Stay away from Harry!"

The calls started the moment Harry arrived home from Hogwarts and persisted for the next three days at odd times of the day and night. Confronting his aunt yielded nothing — she insisted Harry was imagining things. Uncle Vernon supported his wife, observing that 'the boy's freaky friends' were too thick to use a telephone. Given past evidence, Harry found this difficult to refute.

On the third evening, Harry narrowly beat his constantly vigilant aunt to the phone only to hear a weighty silence — followed by a click. His efforts earned him a clip across the ear and banishment to his bedroom for the rest of the week. Aunt Petunia even bit her own son's head off at one point — until she realised he wasn't Harry. Profuse apologies, twenty pounds, and the promise of a triple-tier chocolate cake pacified an impressively indignant Dudley. Bizarre as it was to be mistaken for his elephantine cousin, Harry was more curious than concerned. Just a month shy of his sixteenth birthday, he'd been hunted all his life and found it difficult to be frightened of a foe polite enough to call ahead first.

Hiding now in his aunt's kitchen, squatting beside a cupboard chock-full of health-food treats, Harry knew there was no place in the world that could possibly be safer for him. Dumbledore had seen to that. It wasn't a particularly cheery thought. Yet as safe as Harry was, his current situation was not without its perils: if he heard *Greensleeves* one more time, he thought he just might invite a couple of Dementors to tea.

"Alas, my love, you do me wrong," she wailed tunelessly, *"to cast me off discourteously, for I have loved you well and long, delighting in your company ..."*

Harry tried plugging his ears. It didn't help. The electric mixer didn't think much of its mistress's singing either and aggressively drowned her out, giving the boy some respite. Invisible, he resumed clinically appraising his aunt. It was odd seeing her alone. Not once all morning had anything pinched her nose, or creased her brow, or sucked in her breath. On the contrary she looked — though Harry hated to admit it — perfectly happy. Just a normal mum going about her business, mixing batter for a cake Harry knew he would only ever smell.

The electric mixer ground to a halt, leaving the kitchen silent and full of enticing aromas that hung upon the air, just itching for a pair of nostrils to twitch. Hermione once tried to convince Ron and Harry that smelling food was even better than eating it. Neither Harry nor Ron thought much of that idea. Smells aside, Harry's hamstrings were killing him. Why had he thought squatting was a good idea? He awkwardly tried to shift his weight without his trainers squeaking on the pristine linoleum. A shrill ringing split the scented air, shattering Aunt Petunia's serenity and jerking Harry to his feet. It was them.

"I told you last night he's perfectly fine!" she snapped into the telephone handset, her knuckles white around her chocolate covered spatula. "I'm not going to allow — don't give me that — you know very well this is the safest place for him! He doesn't need you, and I won't have you meddling with my family! ... Don't you think I know that? ... Yes, well, your Professor Dumbledore was good enough to remind me."

Harry blinked as the penny dropped; he realised now it was just the Order of the Phoenix checking up on him. The mystery solved he was left merely mildly surprised any of them finally worked out how to use a 'feletone'.

"I'm well aware of that!" Aunt Petunia said angrily. A frustrated swish of her spatula sent chocolate flicking onto Harry's cloak. Harry hastily hid the stain. "No, absolutely not! You know the agreement; if he wants to contact you, he will. Just stay away from me and mine! That's my last word! I'm serious! ... See that you do! Goodbye! And don't call here again!"

Breathing hard, Aunt Petunia banged the phone down and glared at it for long moment, just to be sure. Rage inflated her chest again: chocolate could be seen insolently dribbling down her refrigerator.

Narrowly missing the woman who might have been a real mother to him, Harry slipped back to his room, sucked the chocolate right off his Invisibility Cloak and penned a short note to Remus Lupin, saying he was just fine and that the Order didn't need to worry about him. Funnily enough there were no more phone calls, yet Harry took to wearing his Cloak more often. Invisible, he was spared the usual dark looks, the resentful mutterings, the bitter sufferance of his existence. Invisible, he could also mess with his family's heads.

Remote controls mysteriously disappeared. Drinks tipped into laps. Radio stations persistently drifted into static. Keys were forever being found in the first place Uncle Vernon looked (but only after a two-hour search). Invisible, Harry could watch the nightly news in peace, and even the odd movie, as he helped himself to Dudley's chocolate sultanas. Invisible, Harry overheard his family's excited plans for a Christmas holiday together in Australia, "Look, Duddikins, they have whale watching!" Harry nearly choked on a sultana.

Initially amusing, three days of silently dogging the Dursleys started to get to Harry. Even Dudley's spoilt-brat antics weren't enough to disguise how happy they all were when their houseguest wasn't around. They didn't even complain to each other about him; Harry wasn't invisible, he just didn't exist. It was a whole new kind of lonely.

There seemed no point in leaving his room any more, and the darkness that had been confined to his nightly terrors slowly stretched its tentacles into the stifling summer days. If it wasn't losing Sirius, or being tortured by Voldemort, it was Bellatrix Lestrange, the Dark Witch who killed her cousin and the last of Harry's true family in one vicious red hex. But for all of his righteous anger, how had he punished her? For all of two seconds he'd knocked her off her feet. Just thinking of how useless he'd been that night made Harry's insides fizz and ferment like rotten fruit left in the baking sun. Maybe some day he'd be able to do more than buy a few seconds grace to run away from danger, but what then? He'd hated Lestrange with every fibre of his being, and yet it was barely enough to give her a headache. What kind of demon did he need to awaken in himself

to turn murderer?

When sleep claimed him that night, Harry's head was still full of Lestrange. Her laughter cackled deep inside his mind, filling him with venom. He tore after her down a cavernous tunnel, his eyes wild and bloody, his hair lengthening into whips that cracked the air. She wouldn't escape him this time! Legs pounding, robes billowing, he leapt through a fire-filled gorge, landing cat-like on a narrow rock bridge. His prey stumbled and fell. He had her now! He wrenched back her hood. Flames exploded left and right; they illuminated a terrified face.

"NO!" screamed Harry. He woke sweating and shaking. The image of his mother's face would haunt him for days.

Sleep was his enemy. He lay miserably in the heat and the dark until the dawn came and with it his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. He paid the delivery owl, glanced at the front page just long enough to see that the world hadn't ended again, and flopped back onto his bed. The 'Chosen One' they were calling him. What would they do, he wondered, if the Chosen One just disappeared — just vanished, like Sirius did when fleeing Britain on Buckbeak? He'd gone somewhere tropical, Harry recalled, given the birds that delivered his letters. The smallest spark of curiosity stirred, catching Harry off guard. Sirius said no one had any chance at all of finding him there.

From beneath his trusty loose floorboard, Harry unburied his small treasure of old letters and birthday cards and found the first letter Sirius ever sent him. He'd read it so many times he knew it by heart. Re-reading it anyway, a rare smile tempted his lips. He could just see Snuffles lounging about in some deserted island paradise, sipping from coconut shells decorated with little umbrellas. Harry's smile distorted into something remote from pleasure. It was him, Harry, blabbing about his scar hurting that dragged Sirius back to Britain, back to danger. And it all started with this first letter, and an offer Harry didn't have the strength to resist:

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

In the pale dawn light, Harry's fingers followed the folds of the old letter, felt the ink caked here and there on the stiff parchment. Almost seriously, he wondered what would happen if he wrote a letter and threw it, like a paper aeroplane, through the black veil. Would Sirius be able to read it? Harry's lips moistened over his furry un-brushed teeth at the thought. There was so much he never got a chance to say.

On the back of Sirius's envelope, Harry wrote one line then another and another, and then he just couldn't stop. His quill blackened the envelope with words that ran over and through each other in every direction until the inkwell was sucked dry and his fingertips were as black as his memories.

A soft hoot sounded; Hedwig was back. Harry didn't even hear her leave. He glanced at his clock, startled to see that several hours had passed. And what did he have to show for it? A dark mess of soggy scribbles. Hedwig hopped onto the desk and nudged the wet envelope with her foot, her disappointment evident. Harry couldn't really blame her. But even if he *could* compose his thoughts properly, and even if he could somehow get a message through the veil, did he seriously expect a reply? At least with the two-way mirror there'd been a chance of speaking with Sirius again.

"Owl!"

It was the first word he'd spoken in days. He rubbed his knuckle and eyed Hedwig reproachfully. Harry knew she wanted him to write a proper letter to someone, but he didn't want his friends' pity. They'd listen, he knew, but then they'd want to 'fix' him. And Harry wasn't of a mind to be fixed. Below stairs, he could hear his Muggle family in motion: Uncle Vernon readying himself for another drilling day, Dudley whining about grapefruit. Harry and his dreary day plodded along, consuming a little food and a lot of sitting about on the bed. Hedwig was growing increasingly agitated, and when she flew out that afternoon Harry didn't see her again for two days. When she returned, it was clear where she'd been: Hermione's handwriting was all too familiar.

Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well and that your family took to heart what the Order said and are treating you better this summer. And I trust you have been practicing your Occlumency, because you know how important it is that your mind stays empty.

I know you must be going mad with boredom, so I did some research and found something fun and educational for you to do whilst strengthening your mind. The instructions are in the box. I haven't tried them myself, but Professor Dumbledore recommended them for developing Mind Arts, so they must be good.

Write and let me know how you go and if you need anything at all. And remember, the summer won't last forever.

Lots of love,

Hermione

It was with some trepidation Harry opened her packages: his and Hermione's ideas of 'fun' were usually several planets apart. The first seemed harmless enough: just a selection of drawing pads. The second was box of three-inch long sticks of charcoal. Taking one, Harry doodled aimlessly on one of the pads. He knew Hedwig was watching him. He could well-imagine her nipping at Hermione's fingers, and his doodle started taking on the shape of the owl's face. He stopped after a few moments, startled to see how good the drawing looked, and that Hedwig's etched face was moving just slightly — like a newspaper photograph. He glanced at the instructions:

'... with Charmed Charcoals you must picture your subject very clearly in your mind, the more precise the image the finer the result. But it's not enough to concentrate on just an image, you must connect emotionally with your subject as well. Emotional certitude is key. Then let your hand relax — don't try to force it. It may help to close your eyes ...'

Turning to a new page, Harry tried thinking about Hermione. It was a sunny summer day, so he was confident her slim nose would be shaded by

a great big book. Settling on that familiar image, he picked up a fresh charcoal and concentrated on the shape of her face, the play of light and shadow on her cheeks, the direction and intensity of her gaze. That part turned out to be easier than Harry thought: Severus Snape forced so many memories out of him during his useless Occlumency lessons that Harry's mind had inadvertently become highly adept at retrieving them. He checked the instructions again. He wasn't sure what 'emotional certitude' meant, so he just thought hard about how much Hermione meant to him and how scared he'd been when she was knocked out in the Department of Mysteries. Before he realised what was happening, his hand was hovering over the paper.

Harry drew for an hour, pausing only for fresh charcoals. When his hand finally stopped, he took a good look for the first time at the whole picture and was delighted. The moment was captured perfectly. Turning to a new sheet, he thought of Ron and remembered the moment when he told him Gryffindor won the last Quidditch Cup. On finishing Ron's picture, he grinned at the sheer joy on his face. His mood improving the longer he thought about his best friends, Harry stared for a long while at the next pristine page. He wanted to draw Sirius, but it was hard to think of him without seeing him falling through the veil. Closing his eyes, he let his hand drift freely, finding its own way. At last, his hand stopped of its own accord. Harry opened his eyes and immediately regretted it.

Sick to his stomach, he stared not into Sirius's face, but into the demon-face of his nightmares — his own face — bloodied and savage, consumed with hate and rage. Before he could even get his head around what he was seeing, a horrified scream sounded. Harry raced into the hall, his wand at the ready — and quite unnecessary.

Remus Lupin, looking as painfully neat and clean as one could possibly be in decades-old clothing, stood on the doorstep smiling pleasantly at a furious Petunia Dursley. Uncle Vernon was at work; Dudley was off with his mates; Harry, perched on the stairs, held his breath.

"Get in, get in!" Aunt Petunia said, yanking Lupin inside and shutting the door with enough enthusiasm to frighten the glass.

"Hello, Harry," Lupin said.

Harry attempted a smile; he had a feeling it didn't work too well.

"Get back to your room," shot Aunt Petunia, adding for Lupin's benefit, no doubt, "where it's safe."

"You can't keep me from —" Harry started angrily, but he broke off at a look from Lupin.

"I have a few matters to discuss with your aunt, Harry," he said lightly. "Perhaps we might have a chat afterwards. I'll come upstairs — where it's safe."

Although burning with curiosity, Harry bid a tactical retreat to his room, where the first thing he did was rip out and set alight his last drawing. So much for 'fun and educational', Harry thought grimly as he watched his demonic face reduce to ashes in his fingertips.

He briefly contemplated digging out his Firebolt but knew that if Lupin were here to escort him anywhere he wouldn't have come alone. The man clearly only wanted to chat, and Harry could guess what about. Already on edge, he rubbed dirty fingers through his grotty hair. Maybe there was going to be a funeral, but with no body to bury, that seemed pretty pointless to Harry. Suddenly aware he was about to have a visitor, he made a token effort to tidy his room, shoving two weeks of discarded newspapers under the bed and dirty clothes under the blankets. He couldn't do much about the smell: the window was already open as wide as it would go; the western sun merely thickened the air and rendered visible grubby fingerprints on dirty glasses and plates on the desk.

Tap. Tap.

"Come in," Harry said at once.

Looking as faded and worn as the room he was entering, Remus Lupin smiled warmly at his former student. Harry had never had a proper guest in his room and waved self-consciously towards the bed, which was now looking rather lumpy.

"Have a seat," Harry said.

Lupin gave no indication of discomfort as he sat upon Harry's laundry.

"How have things been going with your family, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Your phone calls were entertaining."

Lupin looked blank. "What phone calls?"

"Wasn't it you calling to see how I was when I came home?"

"No. Professor Dumbledore has always been very firm about maintaining our distance. I can ask around, if you like."

Harry shook his head; he had bigger things to worry about than nosy Nellies. Settling cross-legged on the bed, he listened soberly whilst Lupin brought him up to date with the latest happenings in the Wizarding World. Not that there was much to tell; Voldemort was lying very low. After the desertion of the Dementors, Madam Bones, Head of Law Enforcement, acted quickly in securing Azkaban Prison, and word was that Lord Voldemort was looking elsewhere for fresh minions, biding his time until he had a clear numbers advantage.

"We think he's been making inroads with the Giants," Lupin said, "and there's a growing number of werewolves going over to his side. I'm trying, but ..." Lupin's hoarse voice trailed off, and he shook his head in a defeated kind of way.

Just then a tray slid through the cat flap of Harry's door. Rapid footsteps could be heard fading away. Both Harry and Lupin stared dumbly at two cups of tea and at a saucer boasting no fewer than four shortbread biscuits. Harry retrieved the tray. Lupin's gaze drifted to the crusty crockery on Harry's desk — and the locks on the door.

"Does that often?" he asked in a carefully casual tone, indicating the cat flap.

"Don't usually get biscuits," Harry said in the same carefully light tone.

After they'd drunk their tea and vanquished the biscuits, Harry caught Lupin eyeing him cautiously, as if considering how best to approach a ticking bomb.

"How are you really doing, Harry?"

"Fine," said Harry. He had an awful sense of where this was going. Lupin just sat patiently, waiting for something more. "What is it you want me to say?"

"The truth would be a start."

"I haven't lied to you!" Harry bristled. A shadow passed over Lupin's face. "Sorry, Professor," Harry said mechanically.

Lupin winced at that. "You don't have to call me Professor, you know; you can call me Remus — or Moony, if you like."

Harry had nothing to say to that. The silence between man and boy thickened on the stale summer air. Harry avoided meeting Lupin's eyes: they were far too observant. Instead, he stared into the dregs of his teacup, deluding himself into seeing the shape of a great big dog.

"You can't be afraid to let people into your heart, Harry," Lupin ventured. "Believe me, that's no way to live."

Harry found his throat tightening. To his horror, his eyes began to itch. Lupin half extended a hand, but Harry shrank from the touch, covering his discomfort by scooping up the tea tray and dirty plates.

"I'll just get rid of these," he muttered and fled for the kitchen, where he could always rely on being safe from people understanding him.

On his return, Harry found Lupin standing by the window, his face healthier in the glow of the late afternoon sun. Harry settled back on the bed, feeling both relieved and oddly forlorn when Lupin didn't try to sit down with him again. The man seemed to be bracing himself for something.

"I have another reason for wanting to see you today, Harry. It's about Sirius's Will. You are his principal heir."

Harry had expected as much, but he could feel no pleasure in the fact.

"I never wanted his money," he said sadly. "My parents left me well enough."

"There's something else," Lupin said hesitantly.

Harry was curious in spite of himself. "What, the house?"

"Well, yes, there's that," Lupin said. "Naturally, Sirius bequeathed all his property to you. I know he had a flat in Chelsea at one stage — there might be others — Black family residences are notoriously difficult to locate." He buried his hands in his pockets and started pacing a little. "Harry, there's something I need to tell you, I ..." Lupin's voice trailed off; he was looking so apprehensive, now, that Harry began to think he was about to tell he'd inherited Dragon Pox. "The thing is," Lupin said at last, "Sirius nominated me to take over as your guardian should anything happen to him."

Harry sucked in an excited breath, but his hopes had been dashed too often to be toyed with.

"Does it mean I'd come and live with you?" he asked bluntly.

"Well, yes, but only if you want to, of course," Lupin said uncomfortably. "I'm not the easiest person to live with."

Harry's confusion deepened at this half-hearted invitation. As tempting as it was to believe his father's old school friend might care enough for the Potters to take their son in, Harry found the idea difficult to credit, not after leading the man's best friend to his death. And yet an old and painfully familiar emptiness inside him ached for it to be true.

"Why?" Harry asked, not really sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Why?" Lupin repeated, his anxiety displaced for a moment by surprise. "You know, full moon and —"

"I don't mean that," Harry said, feeling his face grow hot. "I — I mean, why would you want me to live with you?"

Lupin appeared genuinely stumped and took several long moments to consider his response.

"To own the truth, Harry, I could use the company."

Still waiting for the catch, it took a moment for it to sink in for Harry that he was really being offered a place in Lupin's home — a *real* home. A slow smile crept onto his thin face.

"When can we leave?" he said.

His guardianship accepted, Lupin ran a relieved hand through his thick greying hair, his eyes crinkling with pleasure.

"Straight away, if you like."

Harry was full of questions, but as he listened to the answers he felt his happy bubble bursting.

"You need to be somewhere safe, Harry," said Lupin. "It's either Grimmauld Place or Privet Drive, I'm afraid."

Harry kneaded a sock-shaped lump in the bed; he knew there was really no choice.

"What about Kreacher?"

"Yes," Lupin said, wincing, "I'm afraid you inherited more than just gold and property. Kreacher wasn't the sanest being to begin with, but betraying the Black family really pushed him over the edge. I found him one morning completely catatonic. He's been in an isolation ward at Saint Mungo's ever since."

Harry nodded soberly; he found it difficult to feel any great sympathy for the traitor. Lupin went on to explain that Harry would need to return to Privet Drive for a period the next summer.

"It's important you understand you still have a home here with your aunt. We want the sanctuary charm to last for as long as possible."

Harry nodded philosophically. A few weeks he could handle.

Packing didn't take long. Harry sent Hedwig ahead, leaving only an empty cage and a heavy trunk to transport.

"How're we going to get there?" he asked Lupin, who was taking a moment to clean Hedwig's cage.

"Side-Along Apparition," he replied. "I don't imagine you've done it before. No? The Ministry has approved the use for safety reasons; you might've missed the memo. Kingsley's been so good as to take care of the red tape, meaning we can Disapparate from inside this house," Lupin smiled a little, "hence the conspicuous lack of an Order escort. But we're still smoothing out some niggly problems with old Mr Black's Side-Along Apparition Jinxes. I'll get you to the meeting point and we'll finish on foot. Okay?"

Harry was well-excited. "I'm going to Apparate?"

"We'll give it a shot," Lupin said brightly. "If I lose half of you over Kew, try not to panic." Harry wasn't entirely sure whether Lupin was joking. He was crouched low over Harry's trunk, tightening the straps. "I'll just need to pop back to Headquarters to assemble the troops."

"Troops?" Harry said warily.

Lupin stopped what he was doing and raised to Harry a pair of grey eyes warmed by a self-conscious smile. "I wasn't sure — if you'd want to come that is." Standing up, he patted a hand to his chest and pulled out an envelope. "Sorry, nearly forgot. I thought you might like this."

Harry accepted the envelope and gasped softly. Very carefully, for his fingertips were still grimy with ash and charcoal, he pulled out a Wizarding photo of a very young Lily. She was standing on the lawn in front of Hogwarts Castle, wearing pink bobbles in her hair and brand new robes. The little girl smiled hugely and winked at him.

"I found it while I was searching through some old boxes ..." explained Lupin. "We were in first year then," he added reminiscently. "Elizabeth was desperate to try out her new camera, but she usually captured more feet than faces. This one came out well though."

Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He'd never seen his mother this young — and happy — she was so happy. His nightmares forgotten for a blessed moment, he could just picture her under the Sorting Hat, excited and nervous, her grand adventure just beginning.

Lupin gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze and said, "Back in a tick."

With a faint pop, he Disapparated, returning not thirty seconds later. He transported the luggage first, firmly gripping Harry's trunk and birdcage before Disapparating again. When next he popped back into the bedroom, Harry was more than ready to leave, but Lupin merely smiled and tipped his head to the door.

"You might not be seeing your aunt for a while."

Down in the kitchen, Harry and Aunt Petunia stared at each other in a slightly bewildered silence. Lupin looked between the pair then found something else to look at.

"Bye," Harry said finally. "Thanks for the tea."

He waited but his aunt's horse-like face remained pinched in agony about some internal battle. Whatever it was she might have said or done, she didn't. She merely turned on her heels and left the room.

"You'll want to let me hold onto that for you," Lupin said, indicating the envelope still clutched in Harry's hand. "I'll be careful," he promised, sliding it back into his pocket. "Now grab onto my arm and whatever you do don't let go. Oh, and take a good deep breath. You didn't have a big lunch did you? Ready? One — two — three!"

Yanked into a vortex of nothingness, Harry became a very square peg being ferociously sucked through a small round hole. Vomited back into reality, he bore the indignity of needing to cling to Lupin awhile longer.

"You okay?" Lupin said, steadyng him.

Harry managed a nod. He really fancied throwing up. If that was Apparition, he'd stick to broomsticks, thank you very much. Still wobbly he found himself in a shadowy alley full of dustbins. Clustered all around, pressing in on him, were at least a dozen people. Mad-Eye Moody was there — his electric-blue eye spinning — and a whole bunch of others, many of whom Harry didn't even know. They were all having a good sticky-beak, craning their necks to see him — and his scar.

"Maybe we should carry him," said one.

Harry pushed free of Lupin. "I'm perfectly fine."

"I can whip up a potion," suggested another.

"He's always been delicate," Dedalus Diggle tutted.

Harry lost his temper. "I am not delicate!"

"Harry's *fine*," Lupin said, his exasperation evident. "You didn't all need to come. It's not two blocks away."

"Looks like he could use a good Cheering Charm," Dedalus noted wisely.

"And have him giggling all the way?" Mad-Eye growled. "He'll walk it off."

"Let go of me!"

"Just trying to Disillusion you, boy."

Harry was having none of it. "Get your hands off me! All of you!"

Scrambling out of reach, he grabbed his trunk and birdcage and started dragging them out of the alley, knocking over dustbins on the way.

"Harry!" Lupin called, sprinting after him. "You lot stay where you are!" he shot over his shoulder.

Harry reached the end of the alley, stopping just before daylight. He dropped his trunk with a thud and turned mulishly to face Lupin. Lupin said nothing. Harry's spark of anger was already fading away leaving only a lingering nausea. In all the fuss, he'd almost forgotten what lay waiting for him just two blocks away.

"You forgot Lily," Lupin said, holding out the envelope.

Harry felt even worse. "Thanks," he muttered.

The longer Lupin just stood there looking quietly apologetic the more miserable Harry felt.

"If you let me Disillusion you," Lupin offered, "we'll go on alone, just you and me."

Harry looked back at the others, standing in the dark, some looking bewildered, some looking annoyed, all of them there for the express purpose of putting their lives on the line for Harry Potter. Harry just didn't know what was wrong with him today.

He nodded to Lupin and mumbled, "Sorry."

Lupin smiled a little before going back to brief the others. Moody didn't seem happy but Lupin insisted. Returning alone, he cast a Disillusionment Charm, causing Harry and Hedwig's cage to disappear into the bricks and shadows of the alley. Lupin took hold of Harry's trunk.

"Come on," he said firmly, stepping into the light, "let's get you home."

Making their way on foot towards the house, Harry felt a heaviness dragging at him that had nothing to do with the Order's fussing or his cumbersome luggage. They entered the house very quietly so as not to disturb the horribly life-like portrait of Mrs Black. Lupin removed the Disillusionment Charm, and Harry could feel the man's eyes on him as they carried his things up the stairs. Harry determinedly passed his old room without a glance and climbed higher, to the top floor, where he paused at one brass name-plate only long enough to read 'Regulus Arcturus Black' before moving on to the next.

"That room isn't ready," Lupin said uneasily. "There's a bed made-up in your old room," he offered hopefully, nodding back towards the stairs.

Harry shook his head slightly. Dumping his belongings, he took a deep breath and stepped into Sirius's bedroom. Lupin started to follow, but Harry held up a hand to stop him.

"I need to do this on my own if that's okay," he said quietly.

Lupin didn't look too happy, but he nodded and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

The large bedroom, softly gilded by the early evening sun, felt very still. Harry inched towards the four-poster bed, fingered the gold fringing on

the faded scarlet drapes. The sheets were crumpled and unmade. A feather pillow showed the dent of a man's head. Harry couldn't look at it. Clothes were strewn here and there in piles around the room; nothing seemed to have been touched since Sirius left. Above the fireplace stood silver-framed photographs of James and Sirius, young and carefree. None revealed the tortured soul Harry loved so unconditionally.

At Harry's feet, Sirius's winter cloak lay puddled on the hearth, as if Padfoot had used it for a bed. Picking it up he caught a whiff of something familiar. Nowhere near as rank as wet dog, Sirius's scent was distinctive nonetheless. Inhaling deeply of the musty cloak, he was back once more under his godfather's wing, drinking hot Butterbeers and laughing at daft Christmas Carols. His throat thickened horribly and he dropped the cloak, almost resentfully; he didn't understand why a smelly old rag should affect him so.

He gripped the sandstone mantel, felt the grit beneath his fingertips and hung his head to avoid the dozens of black-haired boys, smiling and waving and dead. Harry could almost see Snuffles now, with one fluid leap, transforming from Padfoot to Sirius, lunging for his wand, tripping over the mess on the floor, bellowing orders to Kreacher, his only thought to rush to his godson's side.

His head hanging, a ragged breath forced open his eyes, and he stared bleakly down into the charred remains of the last winter fire. The wickedly grinning head of Sirius Black refused to materialise.

Harry was just so tired, so done in by loss. He suddenly felt far older than his mere fifteen years, like he'd lived too many lifetimes — and none of them happy. His legs weak, he sank to the hearth, where his hot face found cool relief against the tiles. Squeezing shut moistening eyes, he dragged Sirius's cloak over himself and curled his back to loneliness.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 2 – Boxing Sirius

Harry awoke next morning feeling disoriented. He was on the bed. He had no idea how he got there. Stretching out, he found his shoes were gone and the photo of eleven-year-old Lily was propped up next to his glasses on the bedside table. He donned his spectacles and looked around. Maybe it was the sunshine streaming through the windows, or maybe it was the posters of motorbikes on the walls, or the bikini-clad girls, or motorbikes being ridden by bikini-clad girls, but Sirius's room didn't seem near so oppressive to its new owner in the ungilded light of morning. Pushing off Sirius's cloak, Harry realised he must have missed dinner, but he hadn't slept so soundly in ages. Hedwig was perched on an open windowsill, as if waiting to check her master was all right before going off to catch her breakfast. Harry went over to her.

"Lo, girl," he murmured, stroking her feathers.

Hedwig hooted and nibbled affectionately at his fingers. Moments later, a soft knock sounded.

"Come in," called Harry.

Lupin entered carrying two hot drinks. "Morning; how are you feeling?"

Harry accepted a chipped teacup; he got the distinct impression the man had been loitering outside, just waiting for a sign he was awake.

"Better," he said truthfully. "Thanks."

He motioned with his cup for Lupin to sit down in one of two wingchairs by the fireplace, and they sat and sipped at their steaming drinks. Harry gazed around at the scattered evidence of Sirius's life: piles of laundry, books, shoes; random items crammed atop his dresser: letters combs, brushes, Dark Arts detectors, gag gifts from Christmas. Lupin broke the silence.

"I can pack these things away for you, if you like?"

"No," Harry said quickly — too quickly. "I mean it's okay, I can do that."

Lupin didn't press. After breakfast, he took Harry on a wander through the house. Sirius had done a good deal to improve things, but Kreacher had delighted in making the task as difficult as possible. Many of the rooms were beset by Dark Vermin — and they were breeding again. Huge, old, and ugly, the house seemed to know it was under review and cared not a whit. Harry drifted from one tattered room to another, his pace quickening only when the grandfather clock decided to shoot arrows at him. Lupin was still watching him closely.

"Harry, I know the house isn't in the best state, but I'm sure we could make it more comfortable for you ... a fresh lick of paint, perhaps?"

A fresh *Reducto* Curse, Harry thought ruefully, trudging down the stairs past a grotesque display of house-elf heads. In his opinion it'd take a lot more than a lick of paint to turn his dark mausoleum into a home. But it wasn't all bad news. One cramped bathroom was overgrown with exotic orchids. Harry sniffed the air appreciatively, glad to find at least one thing in the house didn't smell like death.

"Ah, that'd be me," Lupin said, slipping past Harry to switch off some kind of humidifier. He explained that the Ministry permitted him to grow the orchids to sell to the local Muggle flower markets.

"They must fetch a pretty penny," Harry said, pleased. He wasn't so pleased when he learned that the levies the Ministry charged on 'beast commerce' meant Lupin earned a pittance for his troubles.

"But it's a pleasant hobby," Lupin noted philosophically, "and I do like the smells."

Harry nodded but fumed inside having found yet another reason to detest the Ministry of Magic.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix continued meeting at odd times of the day and night, but Harry didn't see too much of them; he wasn't allowed to attend the meetings. There wasn't even a Hippogriff to hang out with: Hagrid took Buckbeak abroad at the end of term. With too much time on his hands, Harry took to haunting the hallways. He'd imagine Sirius, brooding and lonely, prowling as well, always just around the corner, always just out of reach, sometimes as Sirius, sometimes as Padfoot, always as Snuffles. Loitering in the hall on his third night alone, Harry overheard a few members in the drawing room asking Lupin about him.

"It's just not healthy," a woman was saying: she sounded like Tonks. "This place even gives *me* the creeps!"

"It's the safest place for him," countered the deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Safety's not everything," Tonks muttered.

Harry smiled slightly; he knew what Mad-Eye Moody would say to that.

"Harry'll be fine," Lupin said. "He just needs some space. And time to think things through. He'll surface when he's good and ready."

"Yeah?" challenged Tonks. "Just because *you* like to crawl into a hole and refuse help. Look, he's fifteen years old! He needs to get out and have some fun!"

"Tonks, he's just lost the closest thing to a father he's ever had," said Lupin. "You don't get over that overnight."

Harry's smile faded; he'd heard enough.

Back in his room, he sat slumped at Sirius's oak desk. My desk, he corrected himself. The desk was cluttered with old letters, broken quills, and piles of newspapers. Harry swivelled in the chair and traced a finger along the stamped-leather inlay, trying to remember what was in the last letter Sirius wrote to him. He probably wrote it sitting right here. Harry's chest tightened. Never again would he receive an owl from his godfather — not a letter, not a paw-print ...

"Arghh!" Harry angrily swept the newspapers to the floor. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself!"

Grabbing fists full of his wild hair, he pulled hard to give himself something different to hurt about. It didn't work for long. He ached to see Sirius one more time. From the top of his trunk, Harry pulled out the drawing things Hermione sent him. He'd done beautiful, happy pictures of her and Ron; he didn't understand why he couldn't draw Sirius, too. Making space on the desk, he tried again — and again — but every time he tried to draw Sirius, he opened his eyes to see the demon from his nightmares blackening the page: his *own* face horribly contorted with righteous fury.

"Sirius!" Harry hissed in frustration, turning over a new sheet. "Sirius!"

It was no use. The harder he tried to push aside his hatred of Lestrange and focus only on his love for Sirius, the more frightening his demon grew: black hair that previously lengthened and cracked into whips now morphed into fanged snakes growing straight out of his head; eyes merely bloodshot before now cried tears of blood; his teeth grew longer and sharper, and his jaw stretched into shapes it really shouldn't. Slamming shut the pad on himself, Harry knew he was seriously messed up. He resorted to reading *all* of the instructions; surely this was not normal.

'... Charmed Charcoals assist in reaching deep into the artist's psyche, unleashing subconscious hopes and fears about the artist's subject. They can be especially revealing of that which may lie hidden or repressed from conscious thought.'

Looking at the drawings of Ron and Hermione, Harry was flummoxed. They looked fine — better than fine. Hermione was reading serenely from her book, peaceful and happy; Ron remained aglow with the joy of winning the Quidditch Cup. Harry knew his best friends weren't perfect (in fact, they could be dead annoying sometimes), but he understood and accepted that about them. He didn't think there was anything he hid from himself about them. Maybe their drawings reflected that?

Turning through his pages of demons, Harry regarded his subconscious with dismay. Whatever was going on in there, it wasn't pretty. But demon or not, he couldn't understand why *his* face kept coming out instead of Sirius's. He wondered what would happen if he actually tried to draw himself — deliberately. Although it was slightly worrying to think of what his subconscious might decide to throw at him, Harry was not one to give in to fear. Turning to a fresh page, he closed his eyes and thought hard about himself. When his hand halted, he opened his eyes on just an ordinary specky git — not a demon at all. Initially relieved, the longer he watched his self-portrait, the more uneasy he felt. He never realised he looked so — so haunted — his shifting expression that of a boy who'd seen far too much pain and suffering. Harry found it hard to argue with himself on that.

Next morning, when Lupin brought him yet another cup of tea, Harry noticed the man's eyes lingering again on Sirius's things still scattered around the room.

"Do you need a hand unpacking your trunk?" Lupin offered hopefully.

Harry's school trunk stood open but unpacked at the foot of the bed.

"Come on," Lupin urged him, "you might feel more at home with some of your own things around you, don't you think?"

With a half-hearted shrug, Harry knelt by his trunk and started pulling out clothes and books. Lupin sat on the edge of the bed, separating things to be cleaned or mended. He seemed to find an awful lot of things that needed to be cleaned. Harry dug his hand under a fat textbook to pull out his Quidditch jersey.

"OUCH!" he yelped. Blood spurted from his index finger. A sliver of broken glass was wedged under his nail. His hand shook.

"Hold still!" ordered Lupin, but Harry's shaking just got worse.

Harry tried to tell himself it didn't matter — that it was just a piece of glass. It didn't work. Something inside him ached to scream but couldn't work out how to escape. Lupin teased out the splinter and conjured cotton wool to press against the wound.

"Harry?"

"All that time," Harry rasped, his voice ragged but not from the pain in his finger, "all that time I could've used it."

"Use what? Harry?" Remus knelt down beside him, holding pressure to Harry's finger with one hand and rubbing Harry's back with the other.

"Don't," Harry begged; he couldn't bear Lupin's sympathy.

"Harry, tell me," pleaded Lupin.

"Sirius," Harry croaked miserably, "his mirror — a two-way mirror. He gave one to me. He gave me — he gave me this package at Christmas. He said to use it if I needed him. I didn't want to open it — I didn't want him leaving the house." Lupin had gone very pale. "I didn't even know what it was — I didn't know I could talk to him. I was so stupid!"

Lupin shook off his stupor. "Harry — Harry, don't do this to yourself, please. Harry, look at me!"

"Can you ever forgive me?" Harry rasped.

"Forgive you?" moaned Lupin. "Merlin, Harry, any one of us, Sirius included, could've told you Voldemort might try to trick you into going to the Department of Mysteries, but we didn't warn you. You weren't to know! Harry, look at me — you *couldn't* know it was a trap!"

Harry shook his head. He didn't want to hear it. "I had it for months — all that time — all that time I could've —"

Lupin twisted him around by the shoulders. "Harry, we all made mistakes that night — Harry, look at me! We *all* made mistakes — *you* made mistakes, too, but you are *not* responsible for Sirius's death."

A sob caught in Harry's throat; he wanted so much to believe that. "But the mirror ..."

There was an odd hungry look in Lupin's eye. "Do you still have it?"

"What? Yes, I mean, no — I smashed it. I found it too late. I tried to use it — it didn't work."

"What did you do with it?"

"I told you; I smashed it!"

Lupin stared into the trunk, a mixture of longing and apprehension on his face.

"It didn't work!" Harry repeated, getting angry now.

"Do you have all the pieces?"

Harry froze in shock, hope duelling with despair: was there a chance he could talk to Sirius again?

"Can you make it work?" he breathed. Lupin's eyes shot up.

"Harry, listen to me," he said very seriously. "I have no idea — I'm serious, I just don't know. There might be some arcane spells — seriously, I *really* don't know."

Harry was already lunging into his trunk. His cauldron went flying, landing somewhere with a great clatter. As devastated as he'd been bare moments before, he now felt like his heart might just burst through his chest. Scrambling around the rubbish in the bottom of his trunk, he shredded his hands on jagged splinters he found there; he felt no pain at all.

"Harry, Harry, stop! *Stop!*" Lupin grabbed at Harry's hands. "Calm down — I can summon them!"

But Lupin didn't summon them. Instead, he fussed over the new cuts to Harry's fingers.

"It's nothing," groaned Harry in great annoyance, trying to yank his hands free. As feeble as he might look, Harry discovered his werewolf guardian had a vice-like grip. "*It doesn't matter!*"

But Lupin refused to fix the mirror until he'd dressed all Harry's cuts. After what Harry felt was an interminable delay, Lupin finally summoned the shards of the two-way mirror. Harry stared, mesmerised, at the razor sharp splinters hovering in the air between them, glinting and reflecting the sunlight shining through the open bedroom window. Lupin stopped and regarded Harry carefully.

"Harry, all I'm going to do right now is repair the glass; I have *no* idea what we might be able to do after that to make it work — or if it's even possible."

Harry nodded impatiently. Lupin lowered his wand.

"Harry, listen to me — listen to me! I know it's going to be no use telling you not to get your hopes up, but whatever may, or may not, *eventually* come from this, all that is going to happen right now is to fix the broken glass. Nothing will have changed. The mirror *still* may not work and you'll feel all the same things you felt when you smashed it. Do you think you can handle that?"

Harry's first impulse was to say 'yes' and 'just get on with it, thank you very much', but a small doubt niggled at him. Could he handle the disappointment if they couldn't make it work? He wasn't sure but nodded anyway; he had to know. Lupin took a moment longer to appraise him then nodded.

With a curling swish of his wand, he declared, "*Occulus Janus Reparo!*"

The glittering fragments spun and whirled back into a single piece. But something was wrong; there weren't enough splinters; it was still only a shard of the original. Harry's heart couldn't take much more of this. Lupin peered anxiously into the trunk.

"There must be more pieces."

He executed summoning charms through all Harry's belongings in and out of the trunk, but all he recovered was a bit of extra glass-dust. Harry called Sirius's name into the shard anyway, again and again, but there was no response. Crushed as surely as by a giant's hand, Harry stared bleakly into the mirror's reflection of one emerald-green eye.

"It was always going to be a long shot," Lupin said shakily.

Harry dragged his eyes from mirror to man, seeing Lupin as if for the first time. He'd known in his head Lupin had to be grieving for Sirius, too, but it hadn't hit him how much until just then. Setting the broken mirror carefully to one side (for there remained a slim chance they might find the rest of it somewhere), Harry struggled to think of something — anything — to say that would be of any comfort to the man. He couldn't even imagine how he would've felt if Ron had been the one who died. Then he recalled Luna Lovegood's consoling words about the whispers they'd heard from beyond the veil.

"It'll be okay," he said bracingly. "I mean, it's not as if we'll never see him again, is it ... this would've just let us talk to him — sooner."

Blinking back the moisture in his eyes, Lupin nodded mutely. Averting his eyes to give the man some privacy, Harry's gaze fell on the untouched piles of Sirius's robes and shirts and shoes around the room. Suddenly, they were just clothes.

"I'm going to need some boxes, Moony," he said quietly.

Harry would never know who reached out first. Gripping Lupin's back, he buried his head in the man's thin shoulder, knowing he was giving as much comfort as he was getting.

That day, with his new guardian's help, Harry packed away Sirius's belongings in boxes for the attic. He wasn't yet ready to rifle through Sirius's most private and personal papers and asked Remus to pack up the contents of Sirius's desk for him. Remus understood.

"Pack!" declared the wizard with a jab of his wand, and the contents of Sirius's desk obediently fluttered into two red boxes marked 'Sirius — Desk', which Harry stowed under his bed.

Homes were found around the room for Harry's own novelties, games, and gifts, but there were things of Sirius's, too (notably, some of his more interesting posters). The photographs on the mantelpiece stayed, as did Sirius's writing things. The Black family seal, novelty paperweights, and gold-nibbed quill pens were arranged neatly on Harry's newly uncluttered desk. Harry decided to keep Sirius's winter cloak, too. It was far too big for him, just yet, so he folded it to put it away in the top of the wardrobe. He tugged down a dusty suitcase to make room then realised it wasn't a suitcase.

"I didn't know Sirius played the guitar," Harry said curiously.

"He did," Remus said, squinting in memory — or perhaps it was pain, "for about two months. Drove us all nuts."

Harry opened the case and extracted a stylish, glossy-black guitar. Apart from a few broken strings it looked to be in pretty good nick — until Harry turned it over and found a head-shaped hole in the back.

"Kreacher?" he suggested hopefully. Remus chuckled softly.

"Regulus more likely but I wouldn't be surprised." He reached for the guitar and turned it over appraisingly. "Pity the wood's gone. Leave it with me; I might be able to do something with it."

"Cool," Harry said contentedly.

Sitting with Remus on the floor, he emptied an ebony jewellery box full of cufflinks, shirt studs, earrings, dragon tooth neckbands, and the like onto the rug. Remus picked out a ruby cravat pin and smiled at it.

"Haven't seen this in years," he said fondly, holding it a moment longer before passing it over to Harry. "Your father gave it to Sirius on his coming of age."

Harry closed his bandaged fingers around the ruby and was very startled when an image of his father's face flashed across his mind, and he felt a strong sensation of affection and warmth, as if he'd just drunk a pint of hot Butterbeer.

"The Animula Charm," Remus explained, "the 'little soul'. It allows you to invest an object with traces of strongly felt emotions."

Harry closed his fist around the pin once more and smiled. He already knew how Sirius felt about James, but it was good to know how James felt about Sirius.

The jewellery box went back up on the mantelpiece and Remus and Harry continued sorting through the rest of Sirius's possessions. They could have gotten through the task much quicker, but Harry savoured all the little smiles and stories Remus shared as they picked through the strange and whimsical souvenirs of Sirius Black's life. It went the other way, too, with Remus being just as interested in hearing the tales behind some of Harry's things. Harry took great delight in suggesting Remus try solving his Golden Egg clue from the Tri-Wizard tournament. Remus loosed some decidedly colourful language when he got a full blast of Mersong in his ear. The sound set off Mrs Black, but it was worth it to Harry — he hadn't laughed that hard in ages. When Remus returned from dealing with Mrs Black, he noticed Harry's box of Charmed Charcoals.

"Do you use these a lot?" he asked interestedly. "I'd love to see your sketches."

Harry wasn't about to risk Remus seeing his demon faces. Reaching for his drawing pad, he carefully tore out just the happy pictures of Ron and Hermione.

"These are exceptional, Harry," Remus said, holding them to the light. "You should frame them."

"Do you really think so?"

"Come here," Remus said.

He laid Hermione's drawing on the desk and ordered Harry to sign it. Feeling a bit foolish, Harry obliged, signing H.J. Potter in the corner. Smiling broadly, Remus drew his wand and cast a framing illusion around Hermione's picture. Then he used a removable sticking charm to mount the black-framed picture onto the wall where Harry could see it from his bed.

"You can move it around wherever you like," explained Remus. "It'll re-stick."

Harry smiled up at the picture. Hermione's softly drawn face moved ever so slightly as she read peacefully from her book. His bedroom suddenly felt just that much cosier. They framed the second picture, too. Harry mounted Ron's beaming mug on the back of a bright-red motorcycle.

"Nice," said Remus, chuckling. He changed the colour of Ron's frame to a matching, fire-engine red. "Do you have any more?" he asked, waving his wand casually towards the drawing pad, the edges of which betrayed the existence of more artwork inside.

"It's nothing; it's rubbish."

"I'm sure that's not true," Remus said warmly. "Don't worry; you don't need to share them if you're not ready."

Remus said no more on the topic, and instead turned to admiring Harry's Firebolt. Perversely, now that Harry was not obliged to reveal his demons, he had an overwhelming urge to do so, but the moment passed.

"It really is a beauty," Remus said, testing the broomstick's balance on his outstretched fingertips. "Magnificent. Must be a phenomenal ride."

"You have no idea," Harry said, sighing deeply. He reminded Remus that Dolores Umbridge banned him from flying and confiscated his Firebolt for good measure. "Eight months ago ... I haven't even had a chance to ride it yet," he said, staring wistfully out the window onto another fine afternoon.

Remus followed his gaze but said nothing. He didn't have to; Harry knew he'd never be allowed to go joy-riding without half the Order of the Phoenix trailing after him. Perhaps mindful of this, over lunch the next day Remus had a treat for him: he'd repaired the hole in the back of Sirius's guitar. He'd cut a veneer of wood to the same shape of the body of the guitar and glued it straight over the back, trimming and shaping it to fit at the edges.

"Cool, thanks," Harry said. He actually thought it looked a bit naff, but he was quite accustomed to making do with broken hand-me-downs.

"There were some spare strings in the case," Remus said, "but I don't know if they're the right ones. I think you're supposed to use different weights."

Harry strummed the guitar with his bandaged fingers. It sounded wrong — muffled. Harry didn't know if that was him or the instrument.

"Do you know any chords?" he asked Remus, but Remus was as clueless as Harry about such things, so Harry blithely experimented — with truly uninspiring results.

"Merlin, that's awful," Remus said, laughing. "I think I'm going to need to dig out my Charmed Earplugs."

Harry grinned back at him. "Yeah? What do they do?"

"Block out anything you don't want to hear. Excellent for living with teenagers."

Harry strummed blandly and said with an innocent air, "So, cracked that egg yet?"

By the end of his first week in his dim and dirty old house, Harry started to feel more settled within himself, but his new guardian seemed to appreciate he was in dire need of fresh air.

"We could go into Diagon Alley tomorrow, if you like," he offered over dinner. "Maybe pay a visit to Fred and George's new shop." Harry nodded emphatically; his teeth were busy trying to render edible one of Remus's gristly sausages. "We should pick up some supplies for the house, too. Try to cheer the place up a bit. Anything in particular you'd like to do first?"

Harry was still chewing. He looked around the dingy basement, his gaze taking in the dark pantry where he'd been attacked that afternoon by a gang of Doxys that had gotten drunk on a loosely corked bottle of mead. In the opposite corner was Kreacher's fetid den, its decaying wooden door warm to the touch from the boiler inside that kept hot water clanking through the mansion's ancient pipes.

"Well," Harry said, puffing out his cheeks, "I'd be happy just to clear out the vermin and other dark stuff. Wouldn't mind getting rid of the old house-elves' heads," he added darkly.

"I got a tip from Elphias on some new potions for unsticking permanent sticking charms," Remus offered.

Harry brightened at that and scooped up a forkful of Remus's soggy peas.

"Right," Remus said brightly, "we'll go in tomorrow; I'll see if Mad-Eye's free."

"Didn't know Mad-Eye had an eye for interior decorating," Harry said archly.

"It doesn't have to be Mad-Eye," Remus said reasonably. "Tonks might be available. Or Kingsley."

"I can handle myself you know."

"I know that, Harry, but you can never be too —"

"Oh, come on," Harry groaned. "You'll be with me, then I'll be smack dab in the middle of hundreds of people. If Death Eaters want to off me in a public place, they'll just as easy get me on the way to school or in Hogsmeade or whatever. And what about when I just want to go out for a walk? If you want to have me followed, fine, but don't ask me to parade around with a dozen Aurors."

"Hardly a dozen," said Remus.

"Feels like a dozen," Harry muttered under his breath.

Remus said nothing to that, but when they travelled into town next morning, Harry was pleased to discover it was just the two of them (or that if there were more, they were hiding themselves well). Strolling down Diagon Alley, Harry drew quite a few curious looks and whispers, which he studiously ignored; he was determined not to let anything spoil his day out. As they passed the Quidditch supplies shop, he stopped to inspect the new broomstick models. An arm reached around his shoulders, steering him away from the window.

"Don't even *think* about it, Harry," Remus said, chuckling as they walked away, still with his arm draped around the boy's shoulders. Harry leaned in a little. It occurred to him that it felt very good to belong to someone again.

Further down Diagon Alley lurked a flamboyantly cheerful new shop. Harry smiled up at the explosive window displays and at the sign etched in the window: Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Remus stretched a hand to the door, but it flew open before he could even reach the handle. A young girl burst through the entrance, holding her tongue and sobbing uncontrollably before fleeing down the alley. Harry and Remus jumped out of the way of a harassed-looking woman racing after her. Trailing in their wake ambled a smirking little boy clutching a cellophane bag full of bow-shaped purple toffees.

"Harry!" George Weasley roared. "Come in, come in!"

Fred Weasley popped up from beneath the counter, butterfly net in hand.

"Mr Potter," he cried pompously, "how good of you to call!"

Harry looked around in amazement, his mouth hanging, as the twins greeted Remus.

"Careful, Harry," warned George, "you might want to close your mouth before —"

George broke off as something loud and buzzing zoomed past Harry's ear. Harry ducked in surprise. "*What the ...?*"

Fred, net in hand, pounced at Harry, who jumped out of the way.

"Got him!" Fred cried, forcing whatever it was back into a large black hive.

Curious, Harry squinted through a small window in the side of the hive.

Fred leaned down to murmur in Harry's ear, "Don't ask." He picked up the hive and hurried with it into a back room of the shop.

"Muggles let you out of your cage for the day, Harry?" George asked him.

"Or did you just blow them up?" Fred suggested cheerfully, returning from the back room.

Harry stared around mesmerised.

"Left them ..." he said absently. "Is that what I think it is?" He pointed to a tiny perfect swamp inside a glass dome.

"Left them?" George said curiously. "What do you mean?"

Harry dragged his eyes away from the shop displays and looked over to Remus.

"Meet my new guardian," he said proudly.

The twins were delighted and hearty congratulations and much hand pumping ensued. Remus pulled George aside and spoke with him in low whispers about something. Harry thought he heard the word 'birthday' and smiled at his feet. They could have their little secrets.

"Try this," ordered Fred, offering him what looked like a mint. Harry laughed; did Fred think he was born yesterday?

"Okay," he said, eyeing the mint suspiciously. "What's in it?"

Fred just wiggled his eyebrows. Harry wasn't *too* worried: never since the Tri-Wizard Tournament had the boys slipped him anything *really*

nasty. He put the mint in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. For a fleeting moment, he felt light headed then nothing.

Harry looked blankly at Fred. "Is something supposed to happen?"

Fred just smiled. "Tell me how you feel."

"I feel good."

"Tell me this is the most fabulous joke shop on the planet," commanded Fred.

"This is the most fabulous joke shop on the planet."

"Tell me Snape is an absolute dear."

"Snape is an absolute ass," Harry said, bemused.

"Humour me, Harry. Try to say Snape is an absolute dear."

"Snape is an absolute d—" Harry frowned; he felt physically unable to say the word. He tried again. "Snape is an absolute d-d — git!"

Harry felt briefly light-headed again and looked up at Fred in confusion.

"Soothsayer Mint!" Fred declared. "It's got a tiny amount of Veritaserum in it. Enough for a sixty second interrogation!"

Harry guffawed loudly. "That's fantastic! They must take you ages to make!"

"A whole month," Fred agreed. "We're having just a teeny legal problem actually *selling* them but nothing a little creative marketing won't get around."

Harry spent the next hour exploring the shop's merchandise and accumulating a large pile of items to buy. He felt a little embarrassed he'd chosen so much when Fred and George absolutely refused to take his money. On leaving the shop, Remus cast a dubious eye over Harry's joke-shop booty.

"I can just tell I'm going to regret this," he observed.

Next stop was Apollo's music shop, where Harry picked up some new guitar strings and a couple of Weird Sisters' songbooks. They had little diagrams for where your fingers went on the strings, so Harry expected he'd have it all sorted out in no time. He and Remus spent a good deal of time collecting state-of-the-art cleaning sprays and unsticking potions from the Apothecary. Heavily laden on the train home, it suddenly occurred to Harry that he should have paid for the household shopping; Remus Lupin was hardly made of gold.

"Er ... Remus," Harry started tactfully, "let me know what I owe you for all this stuff and I'll fix you up."

"You don't need to worry about that," Remus said lightly. Harry's face must have betrayed his scepticism because Remus added, "Sirius was determined you have a real home; he made ample provision for property maintenance in his Will. Quite an extraordinary amount, actually. I believe he was planning to gut the place and start afresh."

"Right," Harry said, quite relieved. "Um ... he didn't by chance leave any money for food, did he?"

That question drew a rather more arched look.

As usual, the Order was meeting after dinner, leaving Harry at a loose end. When Remus came back upstairs, he found him sitting on his bed, lovingly polishing his broomstick. The man stood in the doorway a moment, looking conflicted.

"Everything okay?" asked Harry.

"Sorry? Oh, yes, everything's fine. Very quiet, actually. All the patrols have been coming up clear."

Harry waited but Remus didn't say anything more. He took out a dog-eared notepad from his robes and flicked back and forth through what looked like long lists of numbers and symbols.

"Six hours," he murmured to himself. "Should be enough ..."

"Enough for what?" asked Harry curiously.

Still examining his notepad, Remus peeked from beneath his lowered brows, a decidedly Marauder-like grin twitching his lips.

"Meet me on the roof — and bring your broom."

Disillusioned, his hair mad, his eyes watering, Harry soared high over glittering London town knowing *this* was what it meant to be alive. His guardian flew more sedately, eyes peeled for danger, but couldn't help but smile and laugh at Harry's exuberance. Every few minutes, like some airborne puppy, Harry flew rings around Remus, letting loose whoops of joy, just to let him know where he was. They flew for hours following the snaking Thames with more twinkling stars visible from below than above. At last they came in to land in a dark field where Harry stumbled from his

broom and collapsed, grinning, onto his back. His Disillusioned body immediately turned green. His grassy chest heaving, he watched Remus drinking from his wand. The man's hand was shaking.

"You okay?" Harry said, scrambling back to his feet.

Remus waved him off. "I'm fine — fine. Water?"

Harry put out a hand to steady the spurting wand and gulped down a long drink. He was amused to see his hand turn to wood-grain, but he didn't like how grey and fatigued his guardian looked — and he didn't fuss a bit when Remus suggested calling it a night. Having had his fun, Harry was content to fly back at Remus's pace, chatting amiably about nothing in particular. It was nearly one in the morning when they landed back on the roof of Black House. It was a Saturday night and loud music blared from a stereo a few doors down, along with the sounds of jeers and laughter then glass breaking — and more raucous jeers. Seemed like someone was having a party. Harry leaned out over a roof gable, turning into a terracotta gargoyle, watching drunken Muggles tripping down Grimmauld Place, the girls in skimpy skirts, the boys in Burberry. He wondered what Ron and Hermione were getting up to this summer ...

"Harry?" There was a clear note of panic in Remus's voice.

"Sorry, I'm here." He picked his way around the gables and chimneystacks to the flat middle of the roof, where Remus stood, looking tense and alert.

"Inside," he ordered abruptly, not letting Harry dally. He didn't relax until Harry was safely back in his bedroom and relieved of his Disillusionment.

"Thanks heaps, Moony!" said Harry, full of beans and grinning madly. "Tonight was just *brilliant!*"

Remus's smile was weary but warm. Harry pressed his luck and asked if it would be okay for Ron and Hermione to come for a visit. Remus agreed but suggested waiting until after the full moon, which was due in a few days' time.

"Sleep well, Harry," Remus said, messing the boy's porcupine hair on his way out.

"You too. Night."

Before bed, Harry sat down to write to his friends but found himself at a complete loss. No words he could think of came close to conveying just how much it meant to him to have a place in a *real* home at last. He'd even started sleeping properly. He decided his friends would just know how he felt, so he simply penned two short notes, dropping not very subtle hints that it would be great if they could come to visit for his birthday. The moment he sealed his envelopes, Hedwig fluttered down from her perch, executed three dainty hops across the desk and gracefully extended a taloned foot.

"You are such a diva," Harry said, chuckling as he tied the envelopes to her leg. Hedwig cooed demurely before flying purposefully out the window.

Slipping at last into his soft, warm bed, Harry glanced at his clock. In six hours, Remus would be tapping on his door with a hot cup of tea. Harry was growing surprisingly fond of tea.

As he closed heavy eyes, just visible over the London rooftops a plump moon was rising.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 3 – Demons Awakening

Harry's second week in his new home started much better than the first. Armed with potions from Diagon Alley, he and Remus declared war on Black House, spraying, stunning, and otherwise obliterating as many Dark vermin and artefacts as they could find. What Harry wasn't able to do magically (and he grumbled constantly about the underage-magic rule), he made up for in physical effort. Just as one pest vanished, another would quite literally crawl out of the woodwork. Harry was kept busy stalking, chasing, and pinning down fleeing vermin so that Remus's wand could work its magic. But it wasn't just Dark Vermin they had to contend with. A vigorous strain of Malevolent Mould had magically sprouted in Harry and Ron's old room, requiring repeated doses of Spray-On-Sunshine. Sirius's great-great-grandfather Phineas Nigellus was extremely put out at being relocated during this exercise. He didn't seem to believe their assurances he wouldn't be in the downstairs toilet for long.

Remus was particularly keen on sorting out the ground-floor library, which had never been a priority for Sirius. Harry was even less interested than Sirius in spending hot summer days stuck in a musty old library until he remembered the Blacks were well-known for dripping in the Dark Arts. He hoped he might find something useful on the permanently locked room in the Department of Mysteries. At least, that's what he told himself — his fingers actually spent a good bit more time searching for books on death. This, however, was not a simple matter. Many of the shelves had collapsed, the wood eaten away by some kind of voracious termite. Further complicating access to the tottering piles of cobweb-covered books was a rare and nasty infestation of Bookworms.

Bookworms fed on knowledge and the more knowledge they consumed the longer they grew. If you stood in one place too long, you'd find one of the purple ribbon-like worms sliding up your trouser leg, making it decidedly difficult to concentrate. When you tried to pull them off they had a habit of breaking, which just made *two* wriggling worms instead of one. And it wasn't just *book* knowledge they craved, if you weren't careful, they'd slip into your ear, seeking whatever items of interest they could find.

Remus explained the primary defence against the creatures was to think dumb thoughts. The worms would then give up on you and go searching elsewhere (though Harry found a good whack with anything by Gilderoy Lockhart worked pretty well). If you couldn't think dumb enough (and this was surprisingly difficult to do sometimes), then the trick was to tempt the worm to eat its own tail. The worm would then feast on its own knowledge until it consumed itself and disappeared with a musty-scented pop. This was, in fact, what usually kept Bookworm numbers from getting out of control: they were cannibals. After devouring a book, leaving nothing but indistinct lettering on the page, they would then turn on themselves, desperate to know what the other worms found out on the last page.

"But how do they even reproduce if they've already eaten themselves?" Harry asked Remus over lunch one day (it wouldn't do to pose such an interesting question whilst any Bookworms were nearby).

"Leaky brains," Remus said. He chuckled at the look of disgust on Harry's face. "Bookworms aren't born by sexual union; they're inspired into life by only the most tortuous, incoherent, perfectly mad thoughts."

Harry could only imagine that Kreacher left them a few presents before being carted off to Saint Mungo's.

"It's quite fascinating, actually," Remus continued, ever the DADA professor. "When you fall asleep and your ear is pressed against the pillow, they incubate in your earwax and —"

Laughing and revolted, Harry plugged his ears and made na-na-na-na noises to drown the man out — and thereafter made sure to keep his lobes scrupulously clean.

Remus was always coming and going with other Order members (occasionally armed with orchids), which Harry understood, but he liked best when he could have his guardian all to himself. Each morning, he'd find ways to draw out their ritual of tea and a chat a little longer. They would sit and talk by the fireplace in their bathrobes with fresh air and the morning sun streaming through the windows. Sirius's bedroom was the one room in the house where Harry actually felt at home, that was his. And Remus seemed to like it, too.

With no Mrs Weasley to run interference, Harry especially appreciated that Remus talked to him about Order business — as much as he could — like how Muggle police were asking inconvenient questions about Emmeline Vance. She'd been found dead not far from number ten, Dowling Street, soon after Sirius's death. Remus said she'd been on guard duty the night of the Department of Mysteries trap. Settling back in his chair, he grew quiet, nursing a coffee mug that had been empty for a good half hour.

"You're worried, aren't you," Harry said after awhile.

Remus didn't try to deny it.

"More people will fall," he said gravely. "We've known that for over a year, but now he's come out of hiding, I can't help but see Dark Marks that aren't even there."

Harry's attention was divided between his guardian and one of Sirius's beach-girls. He wondered again where Sirius had gone on Buckbeak. Leaning forward in his chair, he rubbed a hand over his few scraps of morning stubble.

"Remus, have you ever wanted to — you know — just get away, find somewhere safer to live?"

Remus looked up sharply, guiltily. "Your safety does weigh heavily on my mind, Harry. I know my sanctuary isn't as strong as others could give you ..."

"What? No!" Harry said; that wasn't what he meant at all. "No, here is just fine. I just — it's nothing."

Remus gave every appearance of being deeply conflicted.

"Harry, I know this house isn't the best thing for you. I'd understand if you'd feel safer with your real family. I wouldn't take it personally if you —"

"No!" Harry cut in, alarmed now. "No, it's just ... look, never mind. It's all good — truly. I am *perfectly* happy here."

Remus let it go, but Harry got the feeling he didn't really believe him.

By lunchtime, the man was looking quite ill, and Harry insisted he go lie down while he made their lunch. Taking a well-laden tray to Remus's bedroom, Harry tapped on the door. No answer. He knocked harder and a drowsy voice invited him in. Harry looked around in dismay. Half nestled beneath the stairs to the attic, Remus's bedroom was little more than a windowless hole. It forcibly reminded Harry of his years spent in his cupboard at Privet Drive.

"Up!" he ordered firmly. "My room!"

Remus rolled away and mumbled that he wasn't hungry. Still holding the tray, Harry raised a foot and gave his guardian a firm kick in the backside.

"Oi!" he said loudly. "Now!"

Remus dragged himself from the bed and allowed Harry to nudge him in the right direction. Soon, they were comfortably settled in Harry's wingchairs, where Harry fussed and badgered his dissolute werewolf into eating a respectable quantity of food. After also pumping him with three strong cups of coffee, Remus began to look more like himself.

"Have you been taking your Wolfsbane?" Harry asked sternly; he knew the potion tasted horrible, but what medicine didn't?

"Severus promised he'd try to brew it for me this month, but I haven't heard from him ..."

"He doesn't always brew it for you?" Harry asked, surprised.

"It's a very complicated potion," Remus said, shrugging philosophically. "Not cheap, either."

Something suddenly clicked into place for Harry and he fumed inside at Snape's lack of charity; no wonder Remus Lupin had been looking so increasingly ill over the last two years!

"I was very lucky to be able to take it during the year I was teaching," Remus observed distantly. "I feel sure it added a few years to my life."

Harry said nothing to that, but he made a silent vow to learn to brew the Wolfsbane Potion himself whether he got into NEWT level Potions or not!

After lunch, they resumed their battle with the house, but Harry kept a close eye on Remus and insisted he stop just an hour later. Remus offered some resistance. Harry dug his heels in, banishing the man to his room for a good long rest.

Hedwig returned that afternoon with letters from Hermione and Ron, both of them promising to visit Harry for his birthday. Ron was at his Auntie Muriel's trying to earn some pocket money doing odd jobs for 'the old bat' (by the slimy green smudges on the letter, he too was getting up close and personal with Malevolent Mould). Hermione's letter was much longer and included a clipping from *Potioneers' Monthly*. 'I'm sure you'll be fascinated!' her letter promised. Harry rather doubted that and was ready to let his eyes glaze over until he realised the article was on the Wolfsbane Potion and how a group of Canadian Potioneers worked each month to produce supplies of the potion for donation to the Canadian Ministry's Werewolf Registry Office.

The group, led by the inventor of the potion, Madam Elizabeth Ramsay, had hoped to interest the British Ministry in establishing a similar service but had been stymied by red tape at every turn. The article quoted Madam Ramsay as saying, "It's all to do with that toad Dolores Umbridge! Wretched woman. She'd rather see werewolves dead despite our having a perfectly good method of controlling the condition! Nothing's going to change over there until they get rid of such close-minded, venomous idiots!"

From her notes in the margins, Hermione seemed to be of the opinion that Madam Ramsay would get further with honey than vinegar, but Harry thought the woman was right on the money. No amount of sucking up to Umbridge (who Harry was disgusted to discover had resumed a senior Ministry position in the Beast Division) was ever going to convince her to help 'half-breeds'.

The article included a recipe for the Wolfsbane Potion, which Harry read with a sinking heart. It was the most complication potion he'd ever seen! And dangerous, too. It would be easy to poison with this potion if brewed ill: Monkshood, Hemlock, Arsenic, Nicotine, Blister Beetle Blood, just to name a few of its highly toxic ingredients, many of which were on the Ministry's prescribed list of dangerous ingredients, meaning that no one could brew the potion for either 'commercial or charitable' use without Ministry permission; it was just too dangerous.

Saint Mungo's Healers were allowed to brew it, but their funding was limited and regular benefactors ('Like the Malfoys!', noted Hermione in angry red lettering) did not care to have their gold used for such purposes. That just left brewing for personal use, which actually *was* permitted in Britain. Madam Ramsay was particularly scathing about that, saying it was all well and good if you just happened to be a werewolf *and* an expert Potioneer: "Too many werewolves have died trying to brew the potion for themselves, which is *exactly* what people like Umbridge want!"

At the end of the article was a Canadian address for British werewolves to write to for more information. Despite being a non-werewolf, Harry had no hesitation in taking up his quill.

Tuesday, 21st June

Dear Madam Ramsay,

I was just reading about your work with the Werewolf Registry Support Group in Canada, which I think is fantastic! I wish they'd do that here in Britain. You're right, Umbridge is an utter toad! Anyway, I was just wondering if it would be possible to get some more information on brewing the Wolfsbane Potion. I've got the recipe, but to be honest it's a bit beyond me. I'm hoping to take NEWT Potions next year at Hogwarts, but I'm not sure if my marks will be good enough and I'm really keen to learn the potion. Any help you could give me would be greatly appreciated!

Yours sincerely,

Harry Potter

Harry had briefly considered concealing his identity, but on balance felt that being the Boy-Who-Lived might actually work to his advantage for once. Now he just needed to work out how to send a letter to Canada, not to mention how to get a reply. Harry sneaked a look at Hedwig. She'd flown all the way to the tropics to find Sirius, so she'd probably be fine going to Canada, but Harry didn't fancy the idea of her flying all alone across the cold Atlantic Ocean. He decided to use an International Post Owl instead and added an appropriate postscript to his letter.

P.S. I've enclosed return postage — I hope English Galleons are okay. Please send your reply care of the Post Office in Diagon Alley, London, UK (sorry, I'm kind of in hiding and my house is under a *Fidelius* Charm).

Harry threw in his last comment just in case Madam Ramsay had any doubt she was corresponding with the *real* Harry Potter. Locating his money pouch, he shook out ten Galleons; he figured that'd be more than enough. He sealed the jangling envelope with both Spello-tape and the House of Black seal. By the time he was done, the lumpy envelope looked a fair bit messier than he would've liked, but he had a feeling Madam Ramsay wouldn't mind. She sounded like a fair no-nonsense kind of witch.

"Sorry, Hedwig," Harry said when she flew to him, ready to be of service. "This one's too far for you — oh come on, don't be like that." But Hedwig had already flown on top of the wardrobe. "Honest, it's all the way to Canada! I can't be without you for that long, can I?" Harry finally coaxed her down to his shoulder. "Come on," he said, tipping his head towards the door, "you can help me make dinner."

Harry was quite accustomed to cooking and cleaning chores at Privet Drive, but he'd never made a proper dinner from scratch. He found an old recipe book and settled on a chicken and vegetable casserole, partly because he had all the ingredients, but mostly because it seemed not dissimilar to making a potion (and he figured he could use the practice at not poisoning people). Following the recipe faithfully, he sliced, diced, simmered and sautéed for over an hour. Hedwig watched his progress attentively.

"What do you reckon?" Harry asked her, offering her a spoonful, blowing on it first to cool it.

Hedwig delicately picked out a piece of chicken then went back for seconds. Reassured, Harry went to rouse Remus for dinner — and received a mild chastisement for not waking him earlier.

"You didn't have to make dinner all by yourself," his guardian grumbled reprovingly. "I would've done it."

Down in the basement, Harry ladled a bowlful of casserole for Remus and waited a trifle nervously for his verdict (did werewolves even *like* vegetables?).

"Harry!" Remus cried, all quibbles forgotten. "This tastes wonderful! You didn't use magic, did you?" he added cheekily.

"It's just like making a potion," Harry said dismissively, pleased all the same. He was even more pleased when Remus mentioned there would be no Order meeting that night.

Lingering in the kitchen over ice-cream and Butterbeer, they chatted about plans for house improvements. Harry's thoughts were never far from Remus's dank bedroom.

"Remus, how about your room?" he said, trying to be tactful. "We should do up a proper bedroom for you."

"I can be a bit rough on furniture ..." Remus said, wincing a little.

"But that's only once a month," Harry pointed out. "Keep your old room for then, and we'll do up Regulus's for the rest of the month. I don't reckon he needs it any more." When Remus didn't immediately object, Harry briskly announced, "Good, that's settled then."

Remus threw him an amused look. "Never knew you were such a bossy little thing."

Harry just grinned and took a warming sip from his Butterbeer.

"It feels good," he said after a few moments.

"What does?" asked Remus.

Harry suddenly found the bottom of his bowl intensely interesting. "Here ... just the two of us ... I like it."

Remus raised his bottle and clinked it gently against Harry's. "So do I, Harry. So do I."

Blinking himself awake next morning, Harry squinted at his clock and smiled. Right on cue at seven o'clock, a soft knock sounded on his bedroom door. Harry called out for Remus to enter. Yawning and scratching his stomach, he pulled a blanket off the bed and curled up under it on one of the wingchairs. He accepted a steaming cup from an outstretched hand, but Remus didn't sit down. Harry eyed him appraisingly. The shadows under his eyes seemed darker, his face even greyer.

"You look terrible," Harry said bluntly.

"Thank you," said Remus.

"Full moon tonight?"

Remus heaved a sigh as he sat down. "I won't be in any shape to make your dinner."

No great loss, thought Harry privately. He had a feeling there was more to this mood than his guardian was letting on.

"I am capable of feeding myself, you know. It's not a problem."

Remus nodded half-heartedly and drained his coffee. Harry cast about for another topic to keep him from leaving. A curly question about Shield Charms did the trick.

Remus barely touched his breakfast, and Harry was not above taking advantage of his guardian's weakened state to talk him into allowing a solo visit to the local Tesco supermarket. With things to do, and someone to do them for, Harry stepped out into a fresh summer day with a definite spring in his step. Heavily laden with groceries, he walked home a little more slowly but still in good time. He was just about to knock on the peeling front door when he heard the bolts and chains being undone. The door opened and Harry slipped inside, throwing Remus a bemused look.

"I saw you coming down the street," Remus explained, abashed.

Smiling to himself, Harry handed Remus half the shopping bags. They tiptoed past she-who-must-not-be-woken-up and headed for the kitchen. Unpacking the groceries, Harry gave Remus an appraising glance; the man looked exhausted, as if something was leeching the life out of him.

"You go lie down for a bit," offered Harry. "I'll bring lunch up later." Remus nodded gratefully and retired upstairs.

In an effort to branch out into even more food groups, Harry decided to try his hand at Quiche Lorraine. As with the casserole, he followed the recipe faithfully. He was very relieved an hour later when he pulled a baking dish out of the oven with something that was recognisably quiche-like. He took a tray loaded with quiche and salad and buttered rolls upstairs, but found Remus very hard to get going. Learning from the previous day, Harry started him off with coffee before trying to get him to eat anything. Remus declared the quiche delicious, but Harry noticed he didn't eat much of it; he didn't eat much of anything. When the man started talking about getting back to work, Harry resorted to faking his scar hurting, clutching at his forehead and moaning pitifully, to get Remus to stay put (and, if he did say so himself, he felt he gave a most impressive performance).

Remus was deeply concerned.

"Do you need something for the pain?" he asked, reaching to feel Harry's forehead. "I can get you a potion."

"No, no, I'm used to it," Harry mumbled, not meeting the man's eye. "I'll be fine in a few hours. I might just lie down for a bit. You'll stay with me?"

"Of course," Remus said.

Harry kicked off his shoes, removed his glasses, and lay on his side on the bed. Remus set about closing the frayed curtains against the afternoon light. Sunbeams sneaked through moth holes, illuminating dust particles twirling lazily on the still air.

"Try to sleep, hmm?" Remus murmured, stopping to caress Harry's hair before sitting back down in his wingchair. Harry's left eye was a sliver of green, watching his guardian watching him. "Sleep," Remus chided.

Now officially an invalid, Harry had no option but to obey. His stomach full, his room dim, and his guardian close by, all combined to make sleep rather seductive, and he awoke a few hours later feeling quite refreshed. The moment he tried to rise, he found Remus by his side, pouring him water and checking his temperature.

"No, I'm good, truly," Harry said, embarrassed. "It wasn't a vision or anything."

Remus reopened the curtains, flooding the room with light, and took a good look at him. Satisfied, he allowed Harry to get up but insisted he sit quietly with him for a while (which suited Harry just fine).

"Do you get these headaches often?" asked Remus.

Harry shrugged a little. As guilty as he felt about lying, there were plenty of other times when it was real enough.

"Depends on where he is and what he's feeling."

Remus frowned deeply. "Do you feel he is near?"

"No, no, it's fine. It wasn't that bad — seriously, just a headache. He's probably miles away."

Remus didn't seem terribly comforted by that thought. Sitting together by the fireplace, they were both silent a good long while, each, perhaps, trying to think of a different topic. Remus nodded to Sirius's guitar case lying open on the floor.

"How's it going?" he asked gamely.

Just as gamely, Harry lied, "No, it's good."

In truth, Sirius's patched-up guitar produced sounds that could only with great generosity be described as music. Picking it up, Harry experimented with random finger positions in the hope that something resembling music might spontaneously happen. It didn't. He caught Remus looking at him with an intensely painful expression in his eyes.

"I'm not that bad, am I?" Harry joked.

Remus shook his head, as if to clear it. "I'm sorry, the Moon, it ..." He tried to smile, but the smile didn't extinguish the ache in his eyes.

The rest of the afternoon passed quietly, with no more demanding activities than tea-making, reading, and napping.

"Maybe you should go back to your family tonight," Remus suggested out of the blue.

"Sorry?"

"Tonight — the Moon."

"You're hardly in any fit state to Apparate," Harry said reasonably, "and there's like a dozen bolts on your door. Moony's not going anywhere. I'll be fine."

"What about your dinner?"

"There's plenty of quiche left. Don't worry; I'll be fine."

Trying to get Remus's mind off things, Harry remembered his letter for Madam Ramsay. He lowered his voice so as not to ruffle Hedwig's feathers.

"When you feel up to it — not today of course — could I get you to mail something for me at the Post Office, please? It's for abroad."

Remus nodded and Harry retrieved the letter, but then he hesitated to hand it over. Remus really did look ill.

"Actually, you know what, don't worry about it; I'll take care of it next time I'm in town."

"Don't be silly," Remus said, reaching for the letter. "I should be able to pop into the Post Office tomorrow afternoon, or Friday at the latest. It's always worse before the full moon than after. Where does it need to go?"

Reaching for the letter, Remus had to tug a little to get Harry to let go. Already very grey, he turned positively ghost-like when he read the address.

Madam Elizabeth Ramsay

Werewolf Support Group, 42, rue Sainte-Bernadette

Montreal, Canada

A horrible thought flushed Harry's cheeks: what if Remus thought he was going behind his back, talking to strangers about him?

"It's not what you think," he said quickly. "I didn't say anything about you. I just wanted to talk to her about —"

"No need to explain," Remus cut in gruffly. "Of course you should feel free to correspond with her. Perfectly natural." But nothing felt natural to Harry about the way Remus was staring at the Spell-taped letter. "I'm sorry, Harry," Remus said shakily, sliding the letter into his robes. "I think it might be best if I retire."

Harry was all for that. The Moon wouldn't rise for another eight hours, but even just getting out of his chair seemed to rob Remus of what little energy he had left. Harry, on the other hand, was feeling perfectly well-rested. After Remus was safely sealed in his room, Harry bounded down to the library where he took fiendish delight in vanquishing Bookworms. Armed with a spray bottle of Bobbins Anti-Bookworm Bile, he stood in the centre of the library trying to think of things that were interesting enough to entice the worms away from the Blacks' Dark tomes. It was hard work made a little easier when he started pondering his prophecy: that attracted *loads* of Bookworms. It wasn't long before every last Bookworm was gone. Unfortunately, pondering his bleak fate was rather depressing. A Butterbeer was clearly in order. Down in the kitchen, he grabbed a couple of bottles and a few oranges from the pantry and headed back up the stone staircase. Halfway up, he realised someone else was coming down. Harry halted mid-step, his stomach churning at the very sight of the rotten warlock in Sirius's house.

"There's no one down there," he said stiffly.

Severus Snape advanced a few steps, his lips curling with displeasure. "I'll wait."

Harry blocked his path.

"I'd rather you came back later, *sir*," he said, putting as much contempt as possible into the last word.

Snape glowered down at him from his elevated position.

"Out of my way, Potter!" he said, waving one hand dismissively. In his other hand he held a black flask.

Harry's chest swelled with righteous anger. This was his house! He got to decide who came and went!

"I'm sorry, *sir*," he said, an edge creeping into his voice, "but I'd like you to leave now."

"I said, out of my way!" Snape barked, pushing Harry aside.

His hands full of Butterbeer and fruit, Harry stumbled and lost his footing. With nothing to grab hold of, he crashed down the stairs, hitting his head hard and sending bottles smashing into the stone walls. His glasses gone, he lay on the floor gasping for breath. Snape's dark silhouette advanced on him.

"*Get away from me!*" Harry yelled furiously. Snape ignored this. Harry scrambled out of reach. "*GET OUT!*" he roared, shaking with rage. "*GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!*"

Snape recoiled. Spinning around, he slammed down the black flask on the table.

"See that Lupin drinks that!" he hissed then Disapparated with an angry crack and a swish of black robes.

Harry was still shaking when not a second later there was another crack. Startled and breathing heavily, Harry squinted up into the mangled face of Mad-Eye Moody. Moody rapidly assessed the scene, his Magical Eye not missing the broken spectacles, nor the bottles, nor the oranges still rolling across the floor. His spinning eye stopped on the flask on the table and his gnarled hands grabbed at Harry's shoulders.

"Who attacked you, boy?" he demanded. Harry shook his head and tasted blood. "Tell me what happened!" Moody ordered, shaking him.

"I wasn't attacked," Harry said, wincing at the pain in his left eye. "I fell down the stairs."

Moody looked at the stairs then back to where Harry lay trembling, a good fifteen feet away.

"You fell down the stairs," he repeated sceptically. He reached out a leathery hand and helped the boy to his feet. "How'd you manage that?"

"I had help."

"Who?"

"Snape," bit Harry. He rubbed his head and added bitterly, "It was *sort* of an accident."

Moody felt the back of Harry's head and found a lump forming. His electric-blue eye swiftly surveyed the rest of Harry's body.

"You'll live," he decided gruffly. "You'll want to get some ice on that eye."

Moody conjured an ice pack, which Harry accepted. Holding it to his left eye, he started looking for the broken pieces of his spectacles.

"I'll fix those, boy," Moody growled. He swiftly summoned and repaired Harry's glasses.

"Ta," muttered Harry, shoving them in his pocket. He picked up the flask from the table and groaned in frustration: Remus's Wolfsbane Potion!

Moody seemed to read Harry's mind. "I'll see Lupin gets that, Harry."

"Right. Thanks."

More members were coming down the kitchen stairs.

"What happened to you?" asked Kingsley at once.

Harry didn't answer. Holding the icepack to his face, he shoved past them all. Upstairs in his bedroom he collapsed on the bed. A few hours later, Moody stumped, uninvited, into the room. Harry looked up, startled.

"Meeting over?" he asked.

Moody nodded to him even as his Magical Eye did a sweep of the room.

"Just checking up on you, boy," he stated matter-of-factly. "You want to tell me what really happened in the kitchen?"

"Not really," Harry replied, not bothering to keep the resentment out of his voice. "Is there anything else?"

Moody gave him a searching look, grunted a goodbye and left. Harry fell back into his pillows, feeling sore, hungry and very hard done by. He waited until he thought the kitchen would be clear then headed down to collect his dinner. The kitchen was cold, damp and dark when Harry walked in. He flicked on the gaslights and went to retrieve his quiche but found only a few crumbs left in the baking tin.

"Perfect!" he muttered, slamming it into the sink.

Harry woke early the next morning and padded down to the kitchen to brew strong coffee for his werewolf. Taking the whole pot with him, Harry made his way back upstairs and knocked on Remus's door; Remus called out that it was open. Tiptoeing into the dark, Harry murmured a good morning and left the coffee pot and a full mug on a bedside table. Back in his own bedroom, Harry examined his face in the fireplace mirror. His left eye had blackened spectacularly and was almost swollen shut. His lower lip wasn't looking much better. Other grazes and scrapes on his chin and cheeks were impressive but more superficial. Down in the kitchen, Harry was at the stove, turning sizzling bacon, when Remus walked in. He was moving very gingerly.

"Morning, Harry," he called out warmly. "Thanks for the coffee."

"You're very welcome, Remus," replied Harry. Setting a plate of bacon and eggs in front of his guardian, he said, "Er ... Remus, I had a bit of an accident last night."

Remus smiled at the food but then looked up. His face fell and he leapt to his feet in shock.

"*What happened to you?*" Harry let him remove his glasses and examine his face. "What happened?" Remus repeated urgently, his confusion growing. "Did I do this?"

"No, no — nothing like that," Harry reassured him. "I just fell down the stairs."

Remus examined Harry's head and found another lump. "Must have been a nasty fall."

"Yeah," said Harry, putting his glasses back on. "Listen, about that ..."

"Yes?"

"The thing is — look, I don't want you to freak out — but Snape was here; we met on the stairs, he kind of pushed me aside, and I fell."

Remus went very still. "You want to pass that by me again?"

"Your breakfast is getting cold," Harry said, stalling.

"I want to know everything," Remus said with icy calm, "and I want to know it now."

Harry explained what happened. Remus, standing very still, had now gone very white. Harry squinted with his one good eye; he wished Remus would say something — yell — anything.

"Your breakfast ..." Harry said uneasily, nodding his head towards the table, "... you should eat something ..."

"Right," said Remus finally, seeming to come to a decision Harry didn't think had anything to do with bacon and eggs. "Right," he repeated heavily. "I don't think this is working out, Harry. I clearly can't manage to keep you safe. Hell, I can't even keep you fed properly. No wonder you've been looking for options abroad."

Harry didn't know what was happening.

"R-Remus," he stammered, stricken, "no! I don't want to go abroad! I'm fine, *really!* I've had worse mucking about at Quidditch practice!"

Remus heaved a weighty sigh and shook his head miserably, not seeming to see or hear Harry.

"What arrogance made me think I could be your guardian?"

"*What are you talking about?*" Harry blurted, really frightened now.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Remus said sadly. He reached out a hand to Harry's cheek. Harry recoiled as if slapped. Remus's hand fell to his side. "Harry, please, you've got to understand —"

"Understand *what?*" Harry snapped, getting angry now. "A few hiccups and you're ready to give up? If you can toss me aside so easily, it would've been better to leave me rotting with the Muggles!" Remus tried to reach out to him, but Harry shook him off. "At least with *them* I know where I stand! At least with *them* they don't pretend to care about me — they don't pretend to —"

Harry broke off, his eyes smarting. Angry with himself for such weakness, he pulled both hands through his hair.

"Two weeks! That's it? That's all I get? *Fine!*"

Desperate to escape his miserable dungeon, Harry fled, toppling chairs on the way. Remus, breathing hard, caught him at the door. Harry shook him off.

"Let people into your heart, Harry," he spat accusingly. "Well, I let you into my heart and you *stabbed* me in it!"

Shaking now, Remus tried to speak; Harry didn't want to hear it.

"I'll be in Sirius's room, Professor," he said bitterly. "Let me know when I've got to go."

Taking two steps at a time, Harry rushed upstairs. On the way, he tripped over the troll's foot umbrella stand. Mrs Black howled.

Duped yet again by a dream, Harry didn't know how he could have been so stupid falling for some fantasy of living with someone who cared. He grabbed Sirius's guitar and took a mighty swipe at the bedpost. The body snapped clean from the neck and dangled limply, still connected by the strings. He hurled the lot at the bedroom door where it made a substantial musical mess but failed to make him feel better.

Barefoot, he threw on some jeans, grabbed his Firebolt, opened the window wide, and rocketed into the sky. Within seconds, he was but a blur high over London. The red Chinese Pagoda in Kew Gardens flew past before Harry even considered slowing down. Circling back, he landed atop an enormous greenhouse.

"Look, Mummy!" squealed a child's voice.

Far below, a mum, a dad, and a very little girl shielded their eyes to look up at the boy standing on the glasshouse's white ridgeline. Harry reflexively waved back at them and swept at imaginary gutters with his broomstick. The family moved on. Sitting astride the ridgeline, as if riding a glass horse, Harry lingered above the greenhouse for hours, watching one happy family after another exploring the giant ferneries below.

Harry's head was in more of a mess than Sirius's guitar. It was bad enough to be going back to Privet Drive, but he was devastated to have been accepted then rejected by Remus Lupin. He was convinced it was his fate to be forever alone. Always an outsider, always a houseguest, a month here, a month there — but two weeks had to be a record for being kicked out of a foster home, even for a bagful of trouble like him. Anger swelled again. He wasn't going back to Surrey! Sirius ran away at sixteen. He was nearly that.

Harry caught a glimpse of his bruised, misshapen reflection in the curved glass and felt the fight in him transfiguring back into despair. Who was he kidding? They'd just find him again. Find him and make him go back to his wretched family. Just lock him up again.

The midday sun burned Harry's bare neck. He didn't care about his neck, but he knew he'd need to go back eventually; if nothing else, he needed his wand — and his Cloak — and he wasn't leaving his family photos behind. Shooting skywards, Harry gained a safe altitude then set about finding Grimmauld Place. It wasn't that easy without Lupin to guide him. It took several hours to find the right square without being seen. Fortunately, there was a good-sized plane tree outside his bedroom window, through which Harry saw Remus seated on the floor, his head in his hands. Sirius's guitar lay beside him, repaired. There looked to be a good deal of Spello-tape involved. Hot and tired, Harry swooped into the room, startling Remus to his feet.

"Just needed some air," Harry muttered tightly, tossing his Firebolt onto the bed. "Suppose the whole Order's out looking for me."

"No," Remus croaked. He looked even more wretched than Harry felt. Harry waited for Remus to say something else but he didn't.

"Head's killing me," Harry said, pushing past him. "I'm gonna take a bath."

"Harry, wait."

"What for, Professor?"

"Harry, listen to me, *please* ." When Harry turned to face him, Remus faltered, his mouth working but no sound coming out. He ran a hand through his hair, settling himself, before saying, "Harry, you need to understand —"

"I reckon I understand perfectly," Harry cut in. "You realised you made a mistake. You realised I'm not worth it. I get it."

Harry had the satisfaction of seeing Lupin look like he'd been punched in the gut.

"Of course you're worth it!" he cried, appalled. His voice fell to a raw mutter. "Harry, I'm scared."

Harry's mouth had been all but ready to blurt a vicious denial. Lupin's admission stumped him.

"What on earth are you scared of?"

Remus's face twisted in torment. "Myself. Of letting you down — of not being there when you need me."

"So you thought you'd just get that out of the way sooner rather than later," observed Harry, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Thoughtful."

"Harry, I'm scared of what I'm capable of — of hurting you."

From anyone else this risked sounding melodramatic. Remus Lupin clearly meant it literally.

"And you're telling me this now because ..." Harry prompted tightly.

"Because — I gave in to my fears," Remus said, his voice breaking, "I was wrong, I — I'm so sorry." He reached a hand to Harry's cheek. When Harry didn't recoil, Remus said in a voice low and hoarse, "You belong to me. I know that now. You're not something I can or want to give up."

Fresh frustration welled inside Harry — mingled with hope.

"But what you said ..."

"I was wrong, Harry," Remus repeated, his eyes immeasurably sad, "I can't tell you how wrong. Please — I don't want you to leave."

Harry didn't know what to think; he felt angry and grateful and panicked all at once.

"Forgive me, Harry," Remus pleaded, pulling him into his arms. "I — I can't lose you, too."

Harry tried to resist — tried to stop needing someone to want him. It had never worked before, and it wasn't working now. Not knowing what to say, he just nodded mutely into the man's shoulder. Remus's relief was palpable.

"You go have your bath," he said shakily. "I'll have a Soothing Potion ready for you when you get out."

Laying in the bath, his head still spinning, Harry's mind retraced the emotional roller coaster he'd been on ever since he sat his History exam five weeks earlier. He didn't think he could take many more surprises. Trying to relax, he slid deeper into the bath. Bending his aching head under the water, he shook out his hair to wet it thoroughly. Some of the tension from the morning seemed to dissipate in the soothing water, and he just lay there until he grew prune-like and had no option but to face the world again.

A Soothing Potion was waiting for him in his room and he drank half as he dried off. Straight away, he felt more tension leaving him. He shot the towel across the room to score a goal into the laundry basket and was just reaching for his underwear when Tonks burst into the room.

"Wotcher, Harry, I posted your letter for you — oh, God! I'm sorry!" she squealed. Her hair turned a vivid green.

Mortified, Harry bellowed at her to get out. Before he could even finish saying the words, she'd disappeared. Striding to his bedroom door, Harry slammed it shut. Thoroughly aggravated, he skulled the remainder of his Soothing Potion. Unfortunately, the potion no longer seemed up to the task of quelling the turbulence in his mind.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 4 – Transfiguring Things Out

Still fraught from his morning, Harry fitfully prowled his bedroom's threadbare rugs. Though his head had stopped throbbing, a deeper ache inside him had yet to subside. From his bedside table he picked up the photo of the eleven-year-old Lily with shining green eyes. He wondered if his would ever look as bright and happy.

"Hi, Mum," he whispered, stroking the little girl's long auburn hair. "Do I take after you at all? Would you think I was worth it?"

Lily Evans twirled happily, proudly displaying her new robes.

On the mantelpiece, Sirius and James, captive to moments in time, smiled and waved to Harry from inside their photo frames (except for the fifteen-year-olds; they were far too cool to betray any interest). Harry swapped Lily with a fifteen-year-old James (much to James's annoyance). Lily was tickled pink and waved cheerily to the big, black-haired boy who framed her. She even attempted a handstand for him but got thoroughly tripped up in her new robes. An eleven-year-old James next door sniggered at her efforts. Lily pointedly ignored him.

Harry couldn't help but smile at his clueless little Dad, though his smile faded the longer he stared unblinking at his paper family. He and Remus just had to find a way to make things work. They just had to. They were all each other had.

Remus materialised a short while later with sandwiches, more apologies, and a confession he'd sent Tonks in an effort to cheer Harry up. By now, Harry had calmed down enough to almost feel sorry for the man; it seemed clear Remus Lupin felt like he kept getting everything horribly wrong. Settling together in their wingchairs, Harry accepted Remus's peace offering (which wisely included a jug of Butterbeer and a Hagrid-sized block of chocolate).

After his second gloom-lifting Butterbeer, he ventured through a mouthful of chocolate, "I just fell down the steps, for Merlin's sake. You'd have thought I was at death's door the way you reacted." Remus flinched at that. Harry persisted in trying to understand. "Was the full moon getting to you? 'Cause if that's the case —"

Remus waved that away. "I can't blame the Moon for everything, Harry."

Harry squinted shrewdly at him with his one good eye. "But it gets to you; makes you doubt yourself."

Remus didn't deny it. "Tell me what I can do to make it up to you, Harry. I want to earn your trust back."

Harry considered that; he didn't fancy going through this every month.

"How do I know you won't try to send me away again?" he said at last. Remus rubbed at his bare fingers for a moment before replying.

"A long time ago I pushed someone out of my life for much the same reasons I tried to push you away this morning. I never saw that person again. I was wrong then and I was wrong again today. I don't deserve your trust, Harry, but I'm asking for it anyway."

Harry searched the man's worried eyes. Sincere as he clearly was, Harry couldn't help but remember how fast and completely Lupin disappeared on him two years before.

"Look," Harry said evenly, "I don't know how this is supposed to work, but you've got to know by now I'm a magnet for every kind of trouble. Stuff's going to keep happening to me — to both of us, I guess. When it does, we deal with it together. Right?"

"Right," Remus agreed, his relief evident. "I should let you rest ..." He gripped Harry on the shoulder on the way out and said, "You're quite something, Harry."

Harry permitted himself a small smile, but he still wondered how much he could really rely on the man.

Near dinnertime, another knock sounded on Harry's door, but it wasn't Remus.

"Harry, it's me!" called a wonderfully familiar voice.

"Come in!" Rushing across the room, Harry wrapped Hermione in a bone-crushing hug. "I've missed you," he said hoarsely, kissing her cheek and holding her tight. He was beyond delighted to see her. In five years, Hermione had never let him down, had never ever given up on him.

"I've missed you, too," she said, smiling as they pulled apart. Her smile faded when she saw his face. "Remus said you've had a rough week ..."

"Oh, you know, up and down," Harry replied uneasily, pulling her to the wingchairs. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Hermione was busy wincing at his battered face: his split lip, his badly swollen eye, the grazes on his chin and cheeks.

"How are you? You look like a train wreck."

"Well, this," Harry said sourly, pointing to his face, "is courtesy of being tossed down the stairs by our friendly neighbourhood Potions Master." Hermione gasped in horror. Harry just shrugged. "He was being his usual charming self, but I don't think he actually meant for me to fall. But

enough of my melodramas," he said determinedly, "what have you been up to?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," Hermione said, looking interestedly around the room. Then she stopped and gasped. "That's me!" She jumped up for a closer look at her drawing — neatly nestled between two beach-babes — then found Ron's as well. "These are wonderful, Harry!" she gushed. She added triumphantly, "I just knew you'd love Charmed Charcoals!"

Harry had no particular love of drawing demons, but he wasn't about to deny Hermione her moment of glee; she so loved being right.

"May I try them?" she asked excitedly.

"Of course," said Harry. He set up a fresh drawing pad and charcoals for her on his desk.

Hermione took her time carefully reading all the instructions — twice. When she was done, she looked up at Harry with a pained expression on her face and said, "I can't think of what to draw."

"I started with Hedwig," said Harry. "Why don't you try Crookshanks's face?"

Hermione held her hand poised over the sheet of paper and screwed up her face in concentration.

"Okay," she said, nodding to herself. As instructed, she closed her eyes, but she kept peeking to see what her hand was doing, and forcing it to go where she thought it should.

"You need to let go," Harry suggested. "Relax."

"I am relaxed," Hermione insisted. Squeezing her eyes shut, she clutched her charcoal tighter.

Harry stood over her shoulder awhile, watching her progress.

"Are you sure you're thinking about Crookshanks?" he asked dubiously, tilting his head for a better look.

Crookshanks might well be the ugliest feline of Harry's acquaintance, but he definitely did not have full lips and a long freckled nose.

Opening her eyes, Hermione looked down with dismay. She quickly turned the sheet over and started again, murmuring over and over to herself, "Crookshanks ... Crookshanks ... Crookshanks ..."

Just then, Crookshanks padded into the bedroom, sniffing the air and condescending to let Harry pick him up and pet him. When Hermione opened her eyes, her face fell again; her second attempt was recognisable as a cat, but had none of the finesse of Harry's drawings.

"How did you get those ones of Ron and me to come out so well?" she asked, deeply miffed.

Harry fondled Crookshanks's ears and declared with a very straight face, "Emotional certitude."

At dinner that evening an unusually large number of members were in attendance — despite Remus's cooking. Even Professor Dumbledore was present. Ignoring the curious glances people kept sneaking his way, Harry sat down with Hermione across from Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour. Harry hid a smile at the way Bill gently fussed over the French witch, making sure she had enough to eat and drink. Fleur appeared equally smitten. Harry's improving mood was tested upon hearing Snape's name mentioned further up the table.

"I never *did* think he could be trusted," Mad-Eye Moody grumbled.

"But if Harry says it was an accident ..." countered Hestia Jones.

"Accident my eye," Moody growled. "You didn't see him shaking in the corner."

Harry slammed down his goblet with more force than he intended. "I'm right here, you know!"

Conversation around the table halted; Harry felt his face grow hot as all eyes turned to him.

"Thought you didn't want to talk about it?" Moody said. Harry glared at the man; he wasn't wrong.

Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry, there are some who are calling for Professor Snape to resign from the Order of the Phoenix — only you can tell us whether such drastic action is warranted."

Harry met Dumbledore's inscrutable gaze with his one good eye and took a moment to consider his response. He'd dearly love to see Snape get a good kick up the backside, but to be thrown out of the Order? Who would keep tabs on the Death Eaters? Who would make Remus's potion? That Ramsay woman might come through for him, but it'd still take him a good while to learn the potion, even with Hermione to help him. Harry gritted his teeth; there was really no choice.

"Professor Snape's guilty of being careless and petty, but I don't want him kicked out on account of last night." Harry looked around at all the members and added significantly, "The Order of the Phoenix is too important for that to happen."

There was a moment's silence then a clamouring of voices. Dumbledore let the conversation die down before clearing his throat again.

"You are important, too, Harry, but thank you. I should like to ask you another question, Harry, and I would hope you feel you can speak your mind." Harry nodded to the Professor to go on. "This house belongs to you now ... what are your feelings about the Order continuing to use your home for its headquarters?"

Harry felt surprised by the question. Although the members of the Order were inconvenient at times, it had not occurred to him to stop them using the house.

"Not much of a home anyway, is it?" he joked, but no one laughed. Harry shrugged indifferently. "I don't mind, sir. I won't be around much longer — might as well be useful for something."

Dumbledore's brow knitted at that. Harry happened to glance towards Remus, who was staring dispiritedly into his coffee, and felt a pang of remorse; he hadn't meant to sound so cold. The members were also looking at each other uncomfortably. Whispers raced around the long table. Dumbledore raised a hand and silence fell once more.

"The Order of the Phoenix has benefited greatly from the use of Black House, Harry. I suspect it might be time for us to pay a little rent."

"That's really not necessary, Professor."

"I'm not talking about money, Harry," Dumbledore countered. There was a much-missed twinkle in his eye.

The next few days flew by in a frenzy of activity Hermione dubbed the *Black House Blitz*. Sirius set aside ample gold for Black House to be 'made bearable' for Harry, and new furniture and fittings quickly materialised, but that was just the start. Professor Dumbledore decided the Order should 'pay a little rent' by performing the renovations personally and the members took up the challenge enthusiastically, swarming over the house like busy bees.

An unusually determined Remus Lupin created a task force of ten members (amongst them at least three Aurors and a certified Curse-Breaker) and systematically cleansed the house from top to bottom of lingering vermin. They also strengthened existing security charms and even added a few new ones Bill picked up from the goblins. A special Disillusionment Zone was installed on the roof, protecting a broomstick landing-pad and a rooftop greenhouse (at Harry's request) to give Remus a decent chance to grow more orchids.

Wizarding Folk just couldn't help showing off when the opportunity presented itself, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix were no exception. All over the house, rooms were freshly repainted within minutes, new drapery hung with a few flicks of a wand, and furniture moved around as effortlessly as if in a dollhouse. Those were the easy bits; there was one thing that was very much like Muggle renovating: trying to get people to make up their minds. Harry was constantly called upon to settle disputes between competing witches and wizards, all of whom had their own distinctly different and flamboyant styles. Fleur Delacour proved easily the most talented when it came to interior decorating and assumed, unchallenged, the role of artistic director.

"Zee 'ouse, it 'as good bones," she said imperiously, waving airily at the ornate vaulted ceilings, "but it lacks, 'mmm ... a leetle *cinema* ."

For Harry and Remus, Fleur opted for a mannish elegance that would not be out of place in a gentlemen's club: deep comfortable leather sofas and warm, muted tones. She was often brought to tears, however, when confronted with 'surprises' from some of the more exuberant members of the Order.

"*Arry!* I *cannot* work like ziss!" she cried when Dedalus Diggle transfigured her elegant coffee table into a purple wishing well.

Harry and Hermione negotiated a new spot for the wishing well, but they couldn't be everywhere at once, and members contesting for supremacy in a room made the renovations take on the feel of a duel. On Saturday, there was so much wand crossfire in the drawing room that the piano actually exploded. Harry tried to comfort a deeply apologetic Elphias Doge, assuring him he didn't even play, but the old wizard insisted on replacing the instrument. Considering his ratty old piano had been infested with Biting Fairies, Harry felt he came out well-ahead from the mishap.

"They're completely barmy," Harry whispered to Hermione, watching from the third-floor landing as half a dozen members tried to manhandle a grand piano up the stairs (Elphias Doge refused to even consider using magic on it). "I don't need all this stuff."

"It's what Sirius wanted," Hermione whispered back to him. "Oh don't look at me like that; you know he hated the house the way it was." Her voice lowered further. "And I daresay the members are trying to make up for everything you went through last year."

Harry held his tongue. It was all very nice, but none of it was going to bring Sirius back.

And so the renovations continued at a pace that would have both delighted and terrified Harry's Aunt Petunia. On the third floor, Regulus Black's old bedroom was fitted out for Remus (complete with anti-moonlight shutters), and Mrs Black's huge old bedroom was enlarged and furnished with a dozen girlish fantasy beds (just in case, Harry presumed, he happened to need to open a girls' boarding school). However, when it came to Sirius's old bedroom, Harry politely refused all but the most basic updates, though he did remark that a private bathroom would be nice. Hestia Jones was so excited to do something personally for Harry that the results almost put the Prefects' bathroom at Hogwarts to shame. Harry didn't even want to think about how many plumbing charms she must have cast.

Phineas Nigellus was finally rescued from the downstairs toilet. Although a little shocked by the changes, he was well-satisfied to take up a premier position above one of the fireplaces in the downstairs dining room. The dining room had been given over to the Order as their new war room (with Mad-Eye Moody conjuring complex security for the room). Opposite the war room, the library was completely refurbished. Also on the ground floor was a new potions laboratory. Harry was surprised to learn that even Professor Snape made a contribution, providing many of the rare ingredients now stocked in the lab.

At last Harry surrendered to temptation and requested a new kitchen be set up on the first floor opposite the drawing room (he was well-sick of the dungeon basement). Smaller details were not forgotten. Professor McGonagall took particular pleasure in transfiguring all the serpent-headed doorhandles in the house into the lion-headed emblem of Godric Gryffindor (although Harry spotted the elderly Elphias Doge mischievously tip-toeing after her and changing a few back again). Chandeliers and candelabras received similar transformations. But no one, no one at all, could outdo Professor Albus Dumbledore when it came to glorious whimsy. Using a combination of Wizarding Space and the weedy back garden of number twelve, he created a cathedral-like enclosure housing a full-sized Quidditch pitch, complete with grandstand towers and a roof that was charmed, like that of the Hogwarts Great Hall, to reveal the London sky.

Alas, a few ugly items persisted. Fleur managed to camouflage the Black Family Tree tapestry with some kind of floaty material that made it look like a long window, but the one thing no one was able to change or permanently cover up was Mrs Black. To general dismay, the old harridan continued to resist all efforts to remove her. Even so, with more than twenty powerful wands at work, within just three day the feral house had transformed into a handsome home that was, as Sirius had strictly instructed in his Will: 'unrecognisable as the residence of my ancestors'.

And yet, as impressive as the renovations were, there was something unreal about it all to Harry — like it was some beautiful illusion — a dream that could vanish at any moment. Try as he might, he couldn't completely shake the feeling.

"You okay?" Remus asked, finding Harry alone on his four-poster bed, spreadeagled on his stomach, looking through his family photo album.

"No, I'm good," Harry said quietly.

When Harry said nothing more, Remus sat on the bed with him, watching as Harry turned to a wedding-party photo where his parents stood in front of a church with a crooked steeple, beaming and waving at him from between their best man and a blonde bridesmaid. Harry smiled slightly as Sirius ducked around James and Lily to grab the bridesmaid around the waist. She laughed and swatted him away with her bouquet of blood-red orchids. Sirius didn't seem to mind.

"I think I took that one," Remus offered with a faint sad smile. "It was the happiest of days ..." He dragged his gaze away from the photograph long enough to look around appraisingly at Harry's new scarlet drapes and rugs and wallpaper. "Harry, I don't want you to think we're trying to erase Sirius's memory ..."

Harry closed his album and shook his head at the idea.

"I reckon Sirius would've been more than happy to erase a few memories."

"True," Remus said. He tilted his head a little. "Something else worrying you?"

"No," Harry said. Then he sat up on his heels and said, "Yes. I don't deserve this — I don't deserve any of it."

"Harry ..."

"I'm serious. There's a war going on, and the Order's giving my house a ruddy makeover!"

"Harry," Remus said chidingly, "you know better than anyone we've been at war for more than a year. Whilst Voldemort's forces are in retreat, there's not a lot we can do that we aren't already doing. A couple of days mucking about with paint and curtains isn't going to make any great difference in the scheme of things. To tell you the truth, we've all been going quietly nuts, checking and re-checking the same things, waiting for Voldemort to make a move. It's actually been good for morale to be able to work together on something happy for a change — something we know Sirius wanted for you. The only things *you* should be worrying about are OWL results, and Quidditch, and trading Chocolate Frog cards and girls and — well, maybe not trading girls — that might be illegal these days ..."

Harry smiled reluctantly.

"That's better," Remus said, messing the boy's hair. "Give me a hand with dinner?"

Harry's smile grew more confident; dinner he could manage; he only hoped he'd be able to get rid of his werewolf before he started cooking. Admittedly, Remus's Sunday roast wasn't too shabby. His one speciality was a kind of poor-man's trencher: day old bread rolls bought cheap from a bakery in Leicester and stuffed with hot roast beef and gravy. These were eagerly wolfed down at lunchtime by the troops (and Harry), but Harry did crave some relief from red meat three times a day. Luckily, someone kept ringing the doorbell, setting off Mrs Black and leaving Harry in peace to cook up his tasty chicken casserole.

Though not as large as the basement, the new kitchen was considerably more cheery. Light and airy, there was a good-sized dining table and a beaten up old dresser filled with mismatched pieces of Black Family china, silver, and pewter recovered from Kreacher's hidden stashes. None of the old wooden chairs matched, but Harry liked it that way. It reminded him of The Burrow. He did, however, have something of his Aunt Petunia's liking for top-quality equipment. State-of-the-art charmed cooking appliances could be found behind a black-granite breakfast bar with bar stools boasting broomstick-quality cushioning charms. Harry especially liked this layout because it helped keep Remus on the *non*-cooking side of the counter.

By the time he was finished his casserole, made up a salad, and had buns warming in the oven, most of the members had gone home, and Harry was very pleased to set the table for just him, Remus, and Hermione. Just as he was finishing, a member passed by the kitchen and sniffed the air appreciatively. Harry relaxed when he recognised the voice.

"My, my, something certainly smells delicious," Professor Dumbledore declared. "I didn't know Molly was here." Harry grinned and invited the professor to join them for dinner, an offer the elderly wizard was most delighted to accept. "But you must allow me to bring dessert — I have

something at home that is just ready to pop in the oven! I shall return anon!" The professor returned in an ebullient mood, which only improved when he learned who cooked their dinner. "Outstanding, Harry!" he declared, and the others echoed the sentiment. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily as he dabbed his napkin to his lips. "Which reminds me ... if you'd be so kind as to excuse me for just one moment, Remus, Harry, Miss Granger ..."

The Headmaster rose from the table, spun gracefully, and Disapparated without the slightest sound, returning five minutes later with a steaming pie in one hand and two official-looking envelopes in the other. Hermione shrieked. Remus made a grab for the pie as she lunged for her OWL notice, almost bowling Dumbledore over.

"Sorry! Sorry!" She ripped it open and scanned her results, mumbling to herself as she read them. "Oh — oh — oh!" she said excitedly. "Harry, may I borrow —"

"Yes, go, go!" Harry said, confident that Hedwig would soon be delivering very good news to Mr and Mrs Granger.

He opened his own results with greater trepidation. Should be enough, he thought with relief. He'd failed History and Divination, but he somehow scraped an Outstanding in Potions and passed well-enough with everything else that mattered. He was over the first hurdle towards becoming an Auror, though he wondered if career-planning even mattered any more; he didn't imagine you needed too many NEWTs to become a murderer. Lost in his own thoughts, he only belatedly noticed Remus's outstretched hand.

"Don't I get to see them?" said the man, smiling.

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon never asked to see Harry's school results — Sirius either for that matter. Harry handed them over and crossed his arms to wait, oddly nervous for his new guardian's reaction.

"But this is *excellent*, Harry!" said Remus. "DADA especially: Outstanding *and* a special commendation!" Holding the results in one hand, he reached out with the other to pull Harry into a one-armed hug. "I'm so proud of you!"

Harry's cheeks went pleasantly warm. Then he groaned deeply on hearing the doorbell.

"I keep telling Dedalus ..." Remus moaned, rolling his eyes.

He left to deal with Sirius's mother, and Harry started putting out bowls of ice-cream to go with the Professor's apple pie. They waited awhile, but when the others didn't come back, they started without them. As delicious as the dessert was, Harry felt a little awkward to be all alone with Dumbledore, the last time having been when he'd trashed his office.

"The house is looking *brilliant*," he offered when the silence started becoming oppressive. "You and the twins did a *phenomenal* job with the poolroom — that indoor Quidditch pitch is *seriously* cool."

"Good, good," Dumbledore said. He sat back and curled his long beard through his fingers. "I must admit, I did hope improving the state of your home might help relieve some of the pressure of being locked up."

Harry recalled their conversation the night Sirius died. "Yeah ... yeah, maybe."

"You were very quiet, Harry, when you received your results. Is something troubling you?"

Harry avoided Dumbledore's clear blue eyes. First Remus, now Dumbledore? Was he that obvious?

"Oh well, you know," he said, "failing Divination wasn't fun."

"You don't care about Divination, Harry."

Harry couldn't deny that. "Sir, I want to think ahead to what I'll do after school, but I can't help knowing it's all a bit pointless. What with a Death Mark over my head and all."

Dumbledore's brow furrowed. "What do you see as your future, Harry?"

A bitter laugh escaped Harry's lips. "Well, that's the point, isn't it. I don't feel like I have one — not one I have any choice over anyway."

"There are always choices, Harry," Dumbledore said serenely. He peered thoughtfully at the boy over his spectacles. "Have you had any visions or pains from your scar?"

"No, nothing," Harry said. "What do you think that means?"

"I imagine it could mean at least two things: one, that Lord Voldemort has found inner peace and tranquillity," Harry snorted at that; Dumbledore pretended not to notice, "or, two, that he is deliberately closing his mind to you, unwilling, perhaps, to provide you with any unwanted insights."

Harry was just fine with that. He started to clear away the dinner plates, but Dumbledore stopped him.

"Do allow me," he said graciously.

Rising from his seat, he waved his wand with the grace of a music conductor. Dirty plates, goblets, and cutlery glided towards the sink, which magically filled with bubbles. Dumbledore pushed up his sleeves.

"I always did like playing with the suds," he said dreamily.

Late that night, hiding in his bedroom from Dedalus Diggle, who was keen to discover Harry's opinion on live cushions, Harry pulled out his 'demon' drawing pad from its hiding place beneath his mattress. Just after arriving at Black House, he'd tried again to draw Sirius, but succeeded only in reproducing nightmare visions of himself as an increasingly bloodthirsty demon chasing down Bellatrix Lestrange. Turning grimly through his pages of demons, Harry wondered if this was what his subconscious was telling him he needed to become in order to kill. Was Lestrange right? Did he need to lust for inflicting as much pain and suffering as she did before he could even attempt to defeat Voldemort? Harry didn't want to accept that, but he couldn't see any other way. The last drawing in the pad was no help either. After he'd given up trying to draw Sirius, he'd tried to draw himself, deliberately, and that had worked just fine in that he looked perfectly normal — not a demon at all. The only problem was that 'perfectly normal' apparently meant a face full of pain and grief. And this was supposed to be his great power? That he could feel like that? Staring fixedly at his tormented self-portrait, he hated to think this was what he really looked like to other people. No wonder they all thought he was nuts.

"Can I hide in here?" said a voice from the door. It was Remus. "I just killed a cushion," he whispered cheerfully. Harry snorted a laugh. "It was looking at me funny!" Remus said in his defence. Flopping down into his wingchair, he nodded interestedly to Harry's drawing pad. "Ah, who are we drawing now?"

Harry hesitated for a moment then peeled his self-portrait from the pad and handed it over.

"Do I really look like this?" he said plaintively. "Honestly, I'm not that depressed — truly."

Remus examined the portrait carefully, nodding to himself.

"Not depressed, no ... but there's a lot of pain there," he suggested.

Harry shrugged. "I guess so."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Remus asked, leaning forward in his chair.

Harry didn't answer for a moment. Then he sat down and leaned forward, too, elbows to knees, eyes to the floor, and toyed with his fingers.

"I guess I just know too much about things I can't do anything about," he admitted. Taking a deep breath, he lifted his eyes to Remus and said, "After the Department of Mysteries, Professor Dumbledore told me what was in my prophecy."

Remus couldn't hide his shock. "He did? You must be the only one!"

"You don't know what's in it?" checked Harry.

Remus shook his head, clearly rattled. Harry examined his knuckles, trying to work out how he felt about Remus not knowing. It was probably safer he didn't know, but what if Dumbledore told him anyway? Would Remus still want to be the Chosen One's guardian?

"Well ... let's just say it makes OWL results seem a bit irrelevant," Harry said finally. He drew another deep breath and steeled himself for what he had to say. "Remus, I think what's been bothering me more than anything else is that there are these secrets hanging over me, and it's only a matter of time before they surface and you'll try to send me away again because — well, because you'd think being my guardian was too hard. I need you to know what I'm in for. I need you to know — I need to know — whether you're in this for good."

Remus offered no empty bluster, did not even try to deny Harry's concerns were genuine.

"What do you need me to know, Harry?" he asked quietly.

"I — I don't know what I'm allowed to say ... I need to check with Professor Dumbledore ..."

Remus rolled up Harry's drawing and rose to his feet.

"Come on then," he said, standing at his fullest height and with a very determined look on his face. "No time like the present."

They located Professor Dumbledore in the ground-floor hallway, contemplating the scrappy curtains covering Mrs Black's portrait. As they descended the stairs, Harry wondered why it was that the only wizard Voldemort ever feared was unequal to the task of obliterating a stubborn old painting.

"Headmaster?" Remus prompted in a low voice. "A word?"

Dumbledore smiled and followed Remus into the library. Surprising no one, Hermione greeted them brightly from behind a hefty tome.

"Oh, there you are, Harry! I wondered where you got to. How were your results?"

"Could've been worse," said Harry. "Erm ... they're up in the kitchen, if you want to look."

"Why don't you take your book with you," Remus suggested leadingly.

Hermione looked from Harry to Remus to Dumbledore then back to Harry. She wasn't stupid.

"Right ... yes, probably time to turn in, anyway." Gathering up several plump books for 'bedtime reading', she slipped away, closing the door quietly behind her on three generations of wizards.

Remus waited until they were all seated comfortably in Fleur's deep armchairs before he began. After receiving a nod from Harry, he handed over his self-portrait to Dumbledore.

"Sir," Remus started carefully, "there's something eating away at Harry, but he doesn't want to break your confidence."

Dumbledore unrolled the picture and looked at it for a long while.

"What would you like me to do, Harry?" he asked kindly.

Harry moistened his dry lips; there was no going back now.

"I'd like Remus to know about my prophecy, sir. If that's okay?"

The Professor looked deeply into Harry's eyes. "Are you certain you wish to open that door, Harry?"

Harry gave the question serious consideration. Could Remus deal with the prospect of his ward being murdered? Given his response to him getting a black eye, Harry knew it was a risk, but he'd rather know now if the man was going to bail on him. He'd rather know now whether the man would just give up without a fight, like when he resigned from Hogwarts after being revealed as a werewolf.

"I do," said Harry, trying to inject more confidence into his voice than he really felt.

Professor Dumbledore curled his long beard through his fingers and observed, "It is very hard, keeping secrets from those nearest and dearest to you. You have my permission, Harry, to share your prophecy with Remus, or indeed with Miss Granger or Mr Weasley, should you wish to; they have certainly proven themselves trustworthy allies."

Harry nodded to that. Although it was good to know he could, he wasn't sure if he wanted his friends to know his destiny was to become a killer. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Remus watching him.

"That can probably wait a bit," said the man perceptively.

Dumbledore rose from his chair. "I believe we have a Pensieve in our new war room. Would you care to join me, Remus?"

Fifteen minutes later, Remus returned to the library, pale but determined. He walked directly to Harry and sat on the edge of the coffee table in front of his chair, peering intently into the boy's eyes as if searching for his soul.

"I know I made a right mess of things last week, Harry; I know that. And you have no idea how sorry I am it fell on you to set me straight — but you did. Whatever happens I am going to be here for you. You have my word."

Harry rubbed his hands across his face and let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Remus's hands found Harry's wrists.

"Maybe not on the full moon," he said apologetically, "but we can work around that — can't we?" Harry looked up into Remus's earnest face and nodded. "Good, good," Remus said with relief. He gave Harry's wrists a final squeeze before releasing them. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "It's not even that I particularly want to talk about it ... It's like, well, it's just good to know I can if I want to."

Remus considered that for a moment. "I won't pretend to know what you're going through, Harry, but I do understand what it feels like to have your future stolen from you."

Harry's eyes flickered with interest; Remus rarely spoke about his condition.

"Professor Dumbledore can talk about choices," Remus continued, "but sometimes none of the choices available to you are terribly palatable. It was only a few short years ago that the Wolfsbane Potion gave me some hope for a normal life. The years my friends kept vigil with me made the transformations bearable, but when they were gone — well — things got pretty dark ... then I very cleverly chose to push away the one person who could save me. I told myself I was protecting them ..." Remus laughed hollowly. "Well, we both know how that story goes."

"I've been alone a long time, Harry, and there've been times ... well, there have been some pretty bleak times. For every step forward, fate seems to want to send me three steps back. Sometimes I just feel so helpless. That no matter what I do, things manage to get even worse than I ever thought possible." Remus sighed deeply and reached out again for Harry's wrists, gripping them firmly. "And then I met you again, after so many years. I was so proud of you — of what you'd achieved — of the young man you're becoming."

Harry felt a lump rising in his throat to hear this.

"I don't know what my future holds, son, and I don't know what choices I'm going to have to make, but I do know that right now, at this moment in time, being here with you ... well, my *present* is feeling pretty damn good." Remus curled a hand around Harry's neck, his touch a welcome caress under Harry's thick hair. "Carpe diem, eh?" he suggested. "Use each day the best we can, and leave the future where it belongs."

"Carpe diem," Harry agreed huskily.

Remus rubbed Harry's neck a moment longer then said very seriously, "Did you save me any pie?"

Harry snorted a laugh and let his guardian haul him to his feet. Up in the kitchen, the pair sat at the kitchen table, armed with spoons and with the leftover hot apple pie between them.

“Really needs ice-cream,” Harry said leadingly.

“Oh no, let me get it,” said Remus wryly.

Harry reached for his OWL results.

“Can you believe I got an Outstanding in Potions?” he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Remus flopped back into his chair, ice-cream tub in hand.

“Having eaten your chicken casserole, Harry, why, yes, I can! Have you given any thought to which subjects you want to go on with?”

“Yes, actually,” Harry said, dumping fat scoops of ice-cream onto their plate. “Professor McGonagall gave me which ones I need to get into Auror training.”

“You want to be an Auror?” Remus said, impressed. He looked over the results again. “So, what did you do to earn a special commendation?”

“Conjured my Patronus,” Harry said through a mouthful of pie.

Remus smiled. “Prongs rides again!” He lifted one eyebrow and added, “Do I want to know what happened with Divination?”

Harry hid a smirk and said with all innocence, “I thought we weren’t going to dwell on the future?”

Rising earlier than Remus on Monday morning, Harry stretched out deliciously under the covers, feeling as good as he had done in many months. Recalling the depressing self-portrait he’d drawn two weeks before, he felt convinced he could do better.

Sitting at his desk, charcoal in hand, he let his mind drift across his emotions about himself. He didn’t think he’d ever lose the ache in his heart over Sirius — it was part of him — but there *were* things that were going well for him, too: he had place in a real home at last; Voldemort was out of his hair for the time being; the last lingering doubts about Remus deserting him had been dealt with; his OWL results weren’t too shabby, and he was perilously close to making it all the way to another birthday; and on top of all that, Hermione was here, and with any luck Ron might escape Auntie Muriel’s Malevolent Mould long enough to join them. All in all, he was feeling pretty good, right here, right now. Holding fast to those optimistic thoughts, Harry closed his eyes and let his hand float across his drawing pad. He was almost finished when Remus arrived with their morning drinks.

“Don’t talk to me,” Harry mumbled, unwilling to stop. Remus waited obediently in his wingchair.

Within a few minutes, Harry was finished and opened his eyes onto a pleasant surprise. The boy before him looked calm and confident and wore a quiet smile that reached his eyes. Harry thought he was starting to understand the ‘emotional certitude’ thing.

“You can talk now,” he said to his guardian.

“How are you feeling this morning?” asked Remus.

Harry exchanged his new drawing for a cup of tea. “You tell me.”

Remus unfurled the second self-portrait. A slow smile grew on his care-worn face.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 5 – Bewitched

Four days before his birthday, Harry's happiness was complete when Ron escaped Auntie Muriel. On his way to work, Mr Weasley dropped off his two youngest and helped Remus deliver a particularly large consignment of orchids to market. Ron went straight to the poolroom. Ginny wasn't far behind. Hermione watched from the poolroom balcony, using a charmed megaphone to call out encouragement between chapters of whatever she was reading. Late in the day, Remus joined the fliers and managed to surprise Harry with some very deft dodging.

"Oh! He did it again!" Hermione called out helpfully through the megaphone when Remus caught Harry unawares for about the fifth time.

"Whoa! Where did you come from?" laughed Harry.

Remus just grinned. "Your father taught me that move."

"Show me!" Harry demanded at once.

It wasn't easy; it just felt so unnatural, like he was fighting his own body as much as gravity, like a bird reversing mid-swoop. Still, he could see why his father perfected the dodge: it was completely unpredictable.

"I think you're getting the hang of it," Remus said, nodding approvingly. Harry wasn't convinced.

"I'm still drifting to the left," he complained.

"That'll come good with practice," Remus assured him.

Down in goals, Ron and Ginny practiced increasingly aggressive drills.

Hermione finally grabbed the charmed megaphone and yelled, "*Hungry, now!*"

Landing on the balcony, Remus winced at how late it was.

"Time flies when you do," he apologised.

Down in the kitchen, he passed around ice-cold pumpkin juice and suggested pizza for dinner. The teens roared their approval. Remus made them promise not to tell Molly Weasley.

"Back in a tick," he said. "Don't go blowing up the house."

Whilst waiting for food to miraculously appear, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron dissected the transformation of Black House.

"Well, the best bit by far is *definitely* the library!" Hermione declared categorically.

"Big surprise," smirked Ron.

"Pity they couldn't get rid of Sirius's mother," Ginny said.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Would've been good to get rid of her before the party."

Hermione and Ginny gasped.

"What party?" Harry asked, looking around at three mortified faces.

"*Ow!*" cried Ron. Ginny had given him a solid punch in the arm.

"What's going on?" Harry said, a smile playing on his lips.

"It was *supposed* to be a *surprise*!" Ginny complained, punching her brother again.

"Yeah, I'm kinda getting that," Harry said with a wink to Ron, who smiled back sheepishly.

Hermione bit her lip and moaned, "Oh, Remus is so going to kill us! He so wanted to surprise you!"

"Well, I *am* surprised," Harry said brightly, "so no problem."

Just then, Remus strode into the kitchen, his arms full of pizza boxes. He halted at a pained look from Hermione.

"*He knows!*" she wailed. "Ron just let it slip!"

Ron, who was doing a good job of disappearing under the table, cast Hermione a filthy look and mumbled under his breath something that sounded a lot like what a Seeker usually chased. Remus dumped the pizzas on the table, shot a hard glare at Ron, and cuffed him across the back of the head for good measure. Ron's fingers tiptoed towards the pizza. Ginny shoved the steaming boxes towards Hermione, who sternly picked out the smallest slice she could find for Ron's plate (Harry slipped him a bigger piece under the table). A secret no more, the finer points of

'Potterfest16' came spilling out over hot mushroom and pepperoni. Harry learned Dumbledore was in on the party and was arranging for a Portkey to bring the guests into Headquarters. The windows would be charmed to show different scenery, and Mr and Mrs Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody would be joining Remus as chaperones. There would be a party on Friday night, Harry's actual birthday, and the younger guests would stay for the weekend. The members of the Order of the Phoenix also planned to honour the occasion with a feast on the Sunday night. Harry was mightily bemused and impressed by his friends' elaborate plans for him. He was in bed, reading over the lengthy guest list, when Remus stopped by to say good night.

"Oh, shut up," Remus said, laughing at Harry's impish grin. "It was supposed to be just a small thing at The Burrow. Then the twins and the Order got involved, and it seemed to take on a life of its own. Shove over."

Harry made room for Remus to sit down on the bed.

"So is that what this whole Black House Blitz was about?" he asked. "Getting the house ready for a party?"

"Among other things, but yes," Remus said wryly. He looked at Harry shrewdly. "How do you really feel about this weekend? Is it too much?"

Harry, still reeling from the Black House Blitz, couldn't help but remember all the years of watching Dudley being pampered with parties and gifts.

"Yes, it *is* too much," he said, "but it's seriously tragic how much I'm looking forward to it."

Over breakfast next morning, Remus suggested Harry do some more drawings.

"The walls are looking a bit bare now, don't you think?" he said meaningfully.

"Oh, you don't really want my drawings out here, do you?" he said weakly, looking around for support from his friends. It was one thing to have pictures in his bedroom, but to display them around the house like he thought they were so good, well, that was just embarrassing.

"Oh!" cried Hermione, clapping her hands. "You should do drawings of the girls for the party. We can put their faces over which bed they are to sleep in!"

Harry groaned into his corn flakes — hardly the support he was looking for.

"Excellent," Remus said, "that's settled then! Oh, Bill and Fleur'll be here tonight. I think I'll make Toad in the Hole — get a bit of a French thing going."

Harry suppressed a shudder; he'd eaten Remus's Toad in the Hole and strongly suspected Remus used real toads.

"You must be pretty busy," Harry suggested hopefully. "Why don't I cook tonight?"

"Oh, only if you want to," Remus said, swiftly handing over a notepad and pencil that came from nowhere. "Make a shopping list for me, and I'll fetch what you need."

Harry chuckled softly. He knew he'd been had but found he didn't mind too much. He spent the morning flying with Ron and the afternoon baking steak and kidney pies. Knowing he had Weasleys to feed, he made extra. When he was done, he poked his head back into the poolroom, but Ginny was having so much fun on his borrowed Firebolt, Harry decided to let her be. Collecting Sirius's doubly patched-up guitar, he joined Remus and Hermione in the library.

"I didn't know you played the guitar," Hermione said happily. "Play something for me!"

"I'm just learning," said Harry.

After mucking about for awhile, tightening a new set of strings, Harry squinted at his new *Weird Sisters' Greatest Hits* music booklet, guessing at the chords and strumming as many strings as seemed appropriate. He suspected the guitar was out of tune. He wasn't really sure what it was supposed to sound like, but it didn't sound good. After smiling encouragingly for a minute, perhaps in the hope Harry was just warming up, Hermione found something at the furthest end of the room needing her attention. Remus just smiled benevolently over his newspaper; Harry suspected Charmed Earplugs.

"Those pies smell good," Remus remarked. "Fleur'll be pleased — I don't think she thinks very highly of my cooking."

"You're not *that* bad," Harry lied. He laid down his guitar and stretched languorously along the leather Chesterfield — a fatal error.

"Oh good, you're done!" Hermione said brightly. "Now you have time to do the drawings of the girls for the party!"

"Ugh ..." Harry moaned, sticking a purring pillow over his head. "I *really* don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why ever not?" Hermione asked. "They'll absolutely love them!" She reached over, nicked his pillow, and took a swipe at him. Harry stole the protesting pillow back.

"Knowing my luck, I'll turn them all into hags! Half of them will be in tears before the party even starts!"

"Don't be silly; they'll be beautiful! Oh, come on, Harry, it'll be brilliant!" She gave him her best, doe-eyed look.

Harry rolled his eyes and punched his pillow, which puffed up delightedly.

"I can't do that many girls; they take hours! And I can hardly do some and not others."

"Easy!" declared Hermione. "Just do them quarter-size. You'll be through them in no time!"

"Arghh!" Harry growled, having run out of excuses. His pillow breathlessly mimicked him. "Rawrr!"

"I'll take that as a yes!" declared Hermione, racing from the room. She reappeared shortly with Harry's drawing pad, charcoals, and guest list.

Harry dragged himself from the couch, leaving his pillow to deflate forlornly. "All right, who's up first?"

Starting with Abbott, Hannah, Harry worked steadily for the next two hours. Hermione was banished early on because she kept distracting him, continually leaning over his shoulder to ask 'how he was doing'. Ever mindful of his troublesome subconscious, Harry made sure the images of the girls were as flattering as he could possibly make them. He whizzed through Hannah, Katie Bell, Susan Bones, and Lavender Brown, but came completely unstuck on Cho Chang. He tried three times, but no matter what image he fixed in his head, she always appeared on the page with tears streaming down her face. Growing quite vexed, Harry didn't know why she'd even been invited to his party anyway.

Drawing further into his memory, he thought hard about the first time he saw her on the Quidditch pitch in his third year. Then he recalled how she broke off the chase to warn him about Dementors invading the pitch, later learning it had been Malfoy and his apes in disguise. It had been perfect payback how Gryffindor went on to win the game, but Harry felt a small pang of guilt. Even though he was confident he would've beaten Cho anyway, he imagined she regretted ever trying to help him. Somewhat grudgingly, he had to give her credit for never giving him any grief about that.

With a resigned sigh, he shut his eyes and dug deeper, concentrating hard on reviving memories of how he felt about Cho back then, how hard and long he ached to be with her before everything went so thoroughly pear-shaped. When next he opened his eyes, he was rewarded with an image of a very pretty, shyly smiling, somewhat younger version of Cho Chang.

Everyone was in good spirits over dinner, but Harry found the teatime banter oddly affecting. He couldn't help but wish that Sirius was with them. Catching Remus watching him, he tried to make more of an effort to join in the table-talk, which was animated and polarised, ranging from Quidditch, to music for the party, to what the girls would be wearing. Fleur offered to take the teens clothes-shopping for the party. Harry and Hermione jumped at the chance, but Ron and Ginny declined in favour of more Quidditch practice (Harry suspected the real reason was a lack of pocket money).

Harry smiled again at the little gestures of affection between Bill and Fleur; just small things — a gentle touch here, a secret glance there. He'd certainly never seen his aunt and uncle behave like that. Ginny caught Harry's eye and mimed puking while the others weren't looking. She didn't seem to be as taken with Bill's girlfriend as Ron certainly was. As they were clearing plates away, Hermione quietly confided to Harry that Bill had always been Ginny's favourite — he could ordinarily do no wrong in her eyes, but she couldn't understand why he would choose beauty over brains.

"Doesn't give Bill much credit then," Harry whispered back. "I mean, Fleur might be good-looking, okay, absolutely stunning, but she was Champion of her school. The Goblet of Fire didn't care what she looked like. She knows her stuff. I mean, yeah, she can be a bit haughty sometimes, but she's been nice enough to me."

Hermione just shrugged. Then her eyes narrowed at Ron, who was gazing dreamily at the blonde witch. Harry suspected Ginny might not be the *only* one who was jealous of the Frenchwoman.

Next morning, Remus escorted Harry and Hermione to meet Fleur at the Leaky Cauldron. But instead of Diagon Alley, she took them to Harrods. On arrival, she led them down a set of Egyptian escalators to a food hall overflowing with delectable smells and sights. In a far corner of the food hall, behind Harrods Bank, stood a plain green door with a sign that said 'Closed for Repairs'. Opening it, Fleur led them into what appeared to be an unused janitor's closet, full of mops and feather dusters. She closed the door and tickled it with a green feather duster. The closet descended like an elevator and opened onto a luxurious atrium lobby dotted with easychairs and drenched in charmed sunlight. A signpost pointed in all directions to the names of various departments: Ladies Wear, Wizardwear, Teen-Witch, Dress Robes, Magical Portmanteaux, Millinery, and such.

"Arry, why don't you go look round in zee Wizardwear," Fleur said, waving regally to the left. "Ermione and I will join you soon."

Without a backward glance, the girls were off. Harry didn't get very far before he heard a soft pop behind him. In a flash, he spun about, wand in hand.

"Good morning, young sir," said an elderly, elegantly robed wizard, betraying not the slightest awareness of Harry's wand pressing into his chest. "My name is Abernathy; may I offer you any assistance?"

Harry stuffed his wand back into his jacket. He was suddenly very conscious of the state of his old jeans and split trainers. If Mr Abernathy had any negative thoughts about Harry's appearance, he had the good manners to hide them well and led him into a recognisably male clothing area with racks full of Wizarding robes mixed with Muggle garb.

"Why don't I leave you to browse?" He handed Harry a card with a single word: 'Abernathy'. "Just wave my card when you are ready and I shall be delighted to assist you." Bowing ever so slightly, he Disapparated with the very faintest of pops.

Harry chose a few casual shirts and black cargo pants to start with. As he neared the fitting room, he noticed a pair of young witches poring over a table of coloured sweaters. Smiling wickedly to himself, he crept up behind them.

"What size do you think he is?" Hannah Abbott asked.

"I'm not sure — small men's, I'd guess," Susan Bones said, holding up two sweaters side by side. "Do you think the blue or the black?"

Harry slipped between them and said, "Well, if it were me, I'd go the green." The girls jumped and Harry grinned at their horrified faces. "Morning!" he said brightly. He was quite delighted to see them, the last time having been when they helped save him from Draco Malfoy and his goons on the train. "And what brings you ladies down to Wizardwear?" he asked with an innocent air.

"Harry!" Hannah cried, glancing at Susan for support. "We ... er ..."

"Right," Susan said nervously, "um, we were ... um ..."

"Brothers!" blurted Hannah.

"Just checking out some things ..." Susan added lamely.

Hufflepuffs were such hopeless liars, Harry thought fondly. He decided to give them a break.

"Well, I'm glad you're here." He held up two shirts. "What do you think, the black or the blue?"

Relieved, the girls happily launched into style-guru mode, finding things for Harry to try on then sitting in judgement on a sofa just outside the fitting rooms, vetoing anything they didn't like. After not very long, the novelty of this wore off for Harry. Fortunately, Mr Abernathy came to his rescue.

"I think we might need Geoffrey," he decided and clapped his hands three times in quick succession.

There was a loud crack and flourish of robes and standing before them was a very neat, attractive man of middle years. Mr Abernathy introduced him, and Geoffrey circled Harry, scrutinising him. Geoffrey finally stopped whatever it was he was doing and, with a theatrical wave of his hands, screwed up his eyes and metamorphed into a near-perfect clone of the black-haired lad. Even though Harry had seen Tonks morph many times, he was still stunned to see a twin of himself; the only things missing were his scar and glasses.

"Now, why don't you just sit down, my dear, and let me take care of these," said Geoffrey in a voice that wasn't Harry's.

Reaching for a pile of clothes, Geoffrey disappeared into the fitting rooms, and Harry squeezed onto the sofa between Hannah and Susan. This is more like it, he thought, very pleased.

Striding around confidently, Geoffrey modelled outfit after outfit, never seeming to tire. The girls were delighted, and Geoffrey seemed to love having an audience. Although glad to have escaped the changing rooms, Harry still found it very odd to see himself strutting about, especially when Geoffrey decided he needed to style his hair with 'product'.

Nudging Hannah, Harry inspired a fit of giggles when he whispered in her ear, "Do I look a tad gay to you?"

With the help of Geoffrey and the girls, Harry settled on a decent selection of formal and informal Muggle and Wizarding clothes, jackets, belts, shoes, and other bits and pieces for the year ahead. Geoffrey gave a low bow and Disapparated to the ringing sound of the girls' applause. Feeling well-chuffed to be done with his shopping, Harry beamed at the girls and thanked them for all their help.

"I guess I'll see you on Friday then," he said, winking at them.

The girls glared at him.

"You're not supposed to know about that!" Hannah cried, swatting him in the arm.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" Susan said, laughing indignantly.

"Watching you two try to lie was just too adorable," Harry said cheekily.

Just then, Fleur and Hermione walked up to join them, but they didn't seem to have bought anything yet. Fleur went straight to the counter and rifled through Harry's choices, nodding approvingly. She had arranged for him to have a credit facility between Harrods and his Gringotts bank account, and leaving the girls to catch up, Harry signed for his purchases and watched Mr Abernathy pile them into a bottomless, feather-light Harrods bag. It occurred to Harry that Remus could use some new clothes, too, and he asked Fleur to pick out more things to add to his bill. Fleur was delighted to oblige.

As soon as Remus's clothes were added to Harry's very convenient shopping bag, Fleur briskly announced it was time for lunch. Harry was pleased to learn that Susan and Hannah were able to join them. Fleur led them up to the Sea Grill on the Muggle ground floor, where every type of seafood was on offer. Sitting at the marble counter, Fleur held court between Hermione and Hannah, airily dismissing Hermione's challenging questions about French house-elves (a debate Harry had every intention of staying well out of).

"Zey are 'appy to know zey are much better cooks zan zee English elves," Fleur said haughtily, as if that encapsulated everything that needed to be said on the subject (Harry could only dream).

"Be that as it may," Hermione said waspishly, "don't you feel they should be free to —"

To Harry's left, Hannah was listening intently to the debate, but Harry tuned out. He was more interested in the rich aromas of seafood, spices,

and fresh produce, sizzling on the other side of the pink-marble counter. To his right sat Susan, her long, auburn plait dangling past the seat of her stool. She picked at her barramundi fish fillet and gave Harry a searching look.

"How have you been, Harry?" she asked quietly. "I know it hasn't been the greatest year for you."

"No, it hasn't," Harry agreed ruefully. "But it helps having good friends around. I'm really looking forward to the weekend."

"So am I," Susan said, giving his arm a warm squeeze before turning back to her fish. "Fred and George have been in their element. I never knew they were so bossy. We were all given such strict instructions not to tell you anything. So tell me, who let it slip?"

"Ron," said Harry, grinning. "I think Remus was tempted to bite him."

"Right ..." said Susan slowly. "Fred said Professor Lupin was your new guardian. How's that working out? I always liked him."

"It's going well, I think," said Harry. "Remus was good friends with my parents, and we already knew each other pretty well. There've been a few hurdles," he admitted. "Full moon wasn't much fun."

"But preferable to your Muggle family?" Susan suggested curiously.

"Definitely," said Harry emphatically.

Susan smiled sympathetically and shifted gears. "Hermione tells me you're into the guitar. What kind of music do you play?"

Harry shook his head ruefully. "I wouldn't call it playing."

"Still learning?" prompted Susan.

"Still trying to work out how to tune the rotten thing," Harry admitted with a laugh.

"You'll get there," she said encouragingly. "Are you getting lessons?"

"Nah, just mucking around," said Harry. "Going slightly insane trying to memorise all those chords. There must be a million finger positions."

"It helps if you learn them in natural chord progressions," suggested Susan. She smiled at Harry's blank expression. "Half the songs these days only use three chords. And there's other stuff that helps — like pivot fingers — you don't want to move your fingers around more than you have to. Here, I'll show you." She reached for Harry's right hand and said, "Pretend your fingers are the first four strings, and your knuckles are the frets. Right?"

Susan's eyes strayed to the spidery writing on the back of Harry's hand, and her expression darkened for a moment, but she made no comment. Instead, she curled her hand around Harry's fingers and pressed down with three of her fingertips.

"So that's A Major," she said. Holding her second finger steady, she shifted the other two. "And that's A Minor 7th." She shifted two fingertips again. "And that's A Dominant 7th." Susan repeated the chords, humming along for good measure. "See how you don't need to move your second finger?"

Harry's mullet was getting cold, but he was rather enjoying Susan Bones playing his fingers.

"Keep going. I need more chords."

"You need more fingers," Susan countered with a laugh. "Oh, and you'll want to learn slide fingering." Susan demonstrated by sliding her fingertips up and down his knuckles (Harry found that particularly enjoyable). "I could probably scrounge up some old lesson books for you, if you like," she said brightly. "I'll bring them on Friday."

"Excellent. So, you play a lot?"

"Not recently — I'm on the piano mostly."

"Cool," Harry said, adding cheerily, "someone just blew up my piano." He grinned at the appalled look on Susan's face. "No — no, it's all good, seriously. It was this horrible, ratty old thing, and I scored a brand new one as an apology."

"That is one serious apology," Susan noted, impressed.

Harry tugged his fringe down over his scar, knowing full-well why the members were making such a fuss about him.

"Why do you do that?" Susan asked in a voice only he could hear.

"What?" Harry asked, wondering what he'd done.

"Pull your fringe down. You do that a lot."

"Oh," Harry said uncomfortably, "is that all. Old habit, I guess." Susan raised an eyebrow inquisitively, clearly waiting for more. "Don't like people staring at — you know," said Harry, hoping he sounded like he didn't care. Susan frowned and Harry tensed again, now realising what he just said. "Sorry, I didn't mean you were staring at it — I mean ..."

Susan reached up with cool fingers to push the hair off his face. "You're more than a scar, you know."

Harry relaxed again.

"Doesn't always feel like it," he admitted, though felt it was nice for someone to say so.

Susan and Harry spent the rest of lunch chatting about Wizarding musical groups, though Harry felt somewhat ill-informed on the subject.

"Seriously," Susan said when Harry failed to recognise half the artists she mentioned, "you have got to get a wireless. How can you not know the Chocolate Sultanas, I ask you." Harry could only apologise for thinking the all girl band was a snack. "Is it really?" Susan said curiously. "Is that a Muggle thing?"

"You'd hate them," Hannah declared lightly, pushing away the remnants of her healthy tuna salad. "Chocolate Grasshoppers all over again. Come on, we'll be late."

Harry's smile faded; he wouldn't have minded talking longer with Susan, but she and Hannah needed to meet Hannah's mother.

"Come on," Hermione said to Harry, pulling him off his stool. "I need a man's opinion!"

Harry both relished and feared what that implied.

Heading back down to the Wizarding level, he let himself be dragged through a tortuous route to a place where no man ever wanted to go. The route was made even *more* hazardous by racks of women's clothing charmed to move around on their own, looking for customers. They finally arrived in the Teen Witch section, where Harry flopped down in an armchair outside the fitting rooms and waited. And waited. When Hermione finally emerged, Harry made a show of carefully appraising her, tilting his head this way and that, as Susan and Hannah had done to him.

"What do you think?" Hermione asked nervously.

Harry's lips twitched. "Nice legs."

"About the outfit!" Blushing, Hermione tried to push the denim skirt towards her knees. "It's too short, isn't it?"

"Not possible," Harry said cheekily. Hermione blushed a deeper shade of pink. Harry waved his hands in apology. "No, no, sorry, sorry; you look very nice," he assured her, but strangely enough the rest of the skirts Hermione tried on were all *much* longer.

Sleepy from lunch, the boy sank lower and lower into his armchair whilst Hermione tried on a long succession of formal and informal robes, all of which looked fine to him.

"But which do you *prefer*?" Hermione wailed.

"They all look good to me, but they're *your* clothes," said Harry, in what he thought was a very reasonable way, "just pick what you like the best."

"You are *no* help whatsoever!" complained Hermione. "Look, clear off if you're not going to help me!"

Turning on her heels, she disappeared back into the fitting rooms. Harry raised an eyebrow to Fleur (who was currently being doted on by no fewer than *four* sales assistants). A slight Gallic shrug was all he got in return.

"I'll see you up in the food hall, shall I?" he suggested, racing off before Fleur could object.

Alas, he never made it that far.

It was clearly Dark Magic. Harry tried hard not to panic, but the stands, they kept moving — no matter where he went. Everything moved with him, ensuring he stayed right in the middle of Ladies Lingerie: Harrods very own Department of Mysteries. As if in the eye of a frilly pink hurricane, he spun around nervously and accidentally knocked over a display of bra and panty sets. He started to pick them up before realising what they were and stumbled backwards, dropping them as if burned.

"Need a hand?" asked a girl's voice.

Harry jumped up, his cheeks crimson.

"Oh, thanks ... sorry ..." he mumbled. He stood by uselessly whilst a blonde girl in purple and pink robes collected and neatly restacked the underwear. "Sorry ... thank you very much," said Harry. "Um, sorry for being so clumsy."

His eyes darted around, failing to find freedom. How could girls possibly need so much underwear? The girl smiled at him.

"Don't worry about it. Looking for something in particular?" Harry shook his head, horrified. "Kidding!" she said. "You English boys are such easy marks."

Noticing her accent, Harry offered a feeble smile. "You're American."

The girl's blue eyes narrowed. "Canadian."

"Oh , Canada," Harry said, nodding, to which the girl just rolled her eyes. Harry moistened his dry lips. This was not going well.

"I'm here on vacation," she offered. "How about you?"

"No, I live here. Here in London, I mean. Not 'here' here — I've never been in here before in my life — truly!" The boy knew he was babbling. The girl just stood there, mildly amused. "I'm sorry," he said, relying, as only an Englishman could, on charm through apology. "I've never been able to think too clearly when surrounded by girls' underwear." The girl giggled. "Not that it isn't very nice underwear," he added quickly, for he now noticed she was carrying several of the utterly insubstantial items. "They look *nothing* like my aunt's." The girl giggled harder. "Not that I would know!" he assured her. He really couldn't dig himself a hole big enough. "I'm sorry; I should really stop talking now ..."

Still giggling, the girl returned her selections to the shelves and held out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Natalie, Natalie Ramsay."

Harry swiped a sweaty hand on his jeans. He was sorely tempted to say 'Neville, Neville Longbottom'.

"I'm Harry. How do you do?" he said, shaking her hand.

"Good," said the girl easily.

Still searching for the exit, Harry was torn between wanting to stay and chat with the pretty girl and wanting to run screaming from the lingerie department. Then Natalie's surname registered and Harry's mortification escalated. Was there any chance — any chance at all — that she wasn't related to the inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion?

"You're not related to Madam Elizabeth Ramsay, are you?" he asked weakly.

"She's my auntie. Why?"

Harry surreptitiously checked his fringe was back down over his scar again. "Oh, no reason ... I was just reading this article ..."

Natalie brightened again.

"On the Wolfsbane? Cool!"

She immediately launched into a stream of bubbly chatter about the Canadian Ministry's Werewolf Support Program. Harry made a Herculean effort to nod intelligently and pretend he was not surrounded by quivering, hot-pink knickers. At last, Natalie seemed to appreciate his predicament.

"Oh, do you want me to show you the way out?"

"Yes, please," Harry said gratefully.

Natalie held up a hand against a stand nudging Harry in the back and said firmly but politely, "We're fine, thanks." The stand immediately moved aside. Natalie did the same with the next, and the next. "You just need to be firm with them," she whispered to Harry.

Dodging eager undies, she led Harry through the maze and back to the lobby. He started to mumble a thank you, but she stopped him as if he was another stand of smalls needing a firm hand.

"You owe me. I've been bored out of my brains with just my parents to talk to." She flopped down on one of the couches, pointed to the seat beside her and said, "Sit."

Harry sat. Tongue-tied, he just stared at the girl; she was even prettier in the charmed sunshine — and she clearly had no idea who he was (a fact for which Harry was immensely grateful). Natalie waited a moment, perhaps in the hope Harry might actually speak. When he didn't, she blew out her cheeks and volunteered she'd been travelling through Europe with her parents for the last month and England was the last stop on their way home.

"Do you go to school here in London?" she asked.

"No, no," said Harry. "I'm at Hogwarts."

"Oh, my dad went there," Natalie said interestedly. "I'm at Peace River Academy. Smack dab in the middle of nowhere."

"Best place to be sometimes," Harry said ruefully.

Natalie ventured some more questions and Harry started to relax a little; this wasn't so hard. It turned out they were in the same year at school. In an effort to prove he wasn't a complete idiot, he fell back on his extensive knowledge of DADA, quizzing the girl at length on what material they covered in Canada. Natalie seemed bemused by all the school talk.

"Why? What do *you* do for Defence?"

"Well," Harry said, "we've only ever had one decent teacher and that was my guardian, and that was only in third year. Last year was absolutely *pathetic!* We weren't even allowed to do spells in class!"

Natalie winced appropriately. "That must be hard."

"Yeah," Harry said, moistening his lips. Having exhausted DADA, he was just trying to work out how to casually drop into the conversation that he was Seeker for Gryffindor when the girl asked why he had a guardian. Harry was a bit taken aback.

"Oh. Well, I'm an orphan, you see. My parents died when I was small."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry!" gasped Natalie. "I'm sorry, things just fall out of my mouth sometimes without thinking."

"It's okay, it was a long time ago," Harry assured her. "Listen, when you go back to Canada, could you write to me and tell me what you're doing in Defence? Who knows *what* they'll throw at us this year. And anything you've got on the Werewolf Support Group would be great, too."

Natalie was pleased to oblige and pulled out her address book and a pencil.

"I'm afraid I can't give you my home address," apologised Harry. He found an empty spot and wrote down The Burrow for his address. "This is my friend's address; he'll pass on any owls. Or you can just get me at Hogwarts."

Closing the book, he handed it back and was relieved when Natalie shoved it straight back into her bag; he still had a chance to make a decent impression before she realised who he was. Then he spotted Hermione walking towards him and his spirits soared. He leapt to his feet and beckoned her to hurry up.

"She," he told Natalie, jabbing a triumphant finger towards Hermione, "she is the reason I got stuck in Ladies Lingerie!"

Hermione burst out laughing. "What on earth were you doing in there?"

"Getting lost!" complained Harry. "You abandoned me! I've been in *demon infested mazes* that were easier to get out of!"

Hermione giggled helplessly into her hands. Vindicated as not having some kind of underwear fetish, Harry rocked on his heels and beamed at both girls.

"Luckily, Natalie came along and rescued me. Natalie, this is Hermione — Hermione, Natalie. Natalie is here on holiday from Canada."

"Oh lovely," Hermione said interestedly. "Are you attending Fleuve de Paix? That's Peace River," Hermione added for Harry's benefit.

"I know that," Harry muttered, who knew no such thing.

Hermione launched into all sorts of questions about Canadian house-elves, leaving Natalie somewhat bewildered and Harry increasingly vexed. He'd only just met the girl and Hermione was SPEW-ing all over her! Trying to regain some control of the conversation, he jumped in when Hermione at last paused to draw breath.

"Have you been down to Diagon Alley yet?" he asked Natalie.

"No, but I'm going down there tomorrow," she replied happily. "I can't wait; I've heard about this *amazing* new joke shop!"

Hermione and Harry exchanged impressed glances.

Feeling brave, Harry turned back to Natalie and said, "Erm ... would you like some company tomorrow? I could show you around if you like. Only if you want to, I mean."

Natalie's eyes lit up. "That'd be great!"

"I'll need to check with my guardian," said Harry, crossing his fingers, "but it should be okay. I'll send my owl if it's a problem. Where are you staying?"

"We're at the Leaky Cauldron." Natalie checked her watch. "Actually, I'd better go rescue Dad. I promised I wouldn't be gone long."

Harry and Natalie arranged a time to meet and made their farewells. Fleur materialised a short while later. Deeply pleased with himself, Harry followed her and Hermione back up to the Muggle Food Hall, where he spent the longest time at the coffee counter, trying out different blends for his guardian, as well as stocking up with some of Ron's favourite dishes.

"Pretty girl, Natalie," remarked Hermione, as they passed the fresh produce section.

"Oh? I didn't notice," said Harry, sniffing a melon. Hermione rolled her eyes and Harry laughed. "So, are you the only one who can have a penpal?"

They found Remus waiting for them at the Leaky Cauldron, checking the employment classifieds and sipping a coffee.

"All done?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yeah," Harry said, "I got some really cool stuff. Is it okay if I come back to Diagon Alley tomorrow?"

"Should be," said Remus, folding up his paper, "but we can go down now if you want to pick up something."

"Oh, I think Harry already picked up what he wanted — didn't you, Harry?" Hermione observed sweetly.

"Very funny," Harry said. "No, thank you, Remus, tomorrow'll be good."

After thanking Fleur profusely for their day out, Harry and Hermione headed home on the tube with Remus. Remus sniffed hopefully in Harry's direction.

"Do I smell coffee?"

Back home, Harry made a pot of coffee using a new French Vanilla blend. Taking a sip, Remus exhaled a sigh of pure joy.

"Maybe this Harrods thing wasn't such a bad idea after all," he said. "So show me what you got." He waved his mug towards the Harrods bag. Harry obligingly spilled his purchases across the kitchen table. "These look a bit big for you," Remus remarked, pulling some items closer.

"Yes, they're actually for you," Harry said firmly, tossing a pair of socks at his guardian. "I thought we could *both* use a little sprucing up."

To Harry's relief, Remus smiled at the socks and went off to try on his new clothes. By the time he returned, Hermione and Ginny were badgering Harry to finish his drawings (he hadn't yet got to 'W'). They all looked up as Remus appeared at the doorway. The change was remarkable. Looking years younger, he earned a wolf whistle from Ginny and a 'very nice indeed' from Hermione. Harry was delighted; for the first time he could ever remember, he saw Remus Lupin blush.

"I'll do the drawings after dinner," Harry told the girls. "Remus promised me some flying practice."

"Right," said Remus, "well, I think I might put some old robes back on if we're going to do that."

Harry stayed up late that evening to complete the drawings of all the girls. Sorting through the stack, he carefully checked each one off against the guest list. He stopped at Susan Bones and smiled as he thought of how sweetly hopeless she was when trying to cover up about his birthday. Looking at her drawing more critically, he decided he could do better.

He rated Susan as pretty, but she wasn't really in Natalie's league, though when he tried to recall Natalie's face, he couldn't seem to remember too many details. Picking up a fresh charcoal, Harry turned his mind back to Susan, easily picturing the way her face lit up when she was talking about music, and remembering, too, how good it felt when she was 'playing' his fingers. Comparing the two drawings of Susan, he happily ripped up the first; it didn't nearly do the girl justice. With only one more girl left on the guest list, Harry turned over to a fresh sheet. Closing his eyes, he let his hand find its own way. When he was done, he was bemused to discover that instead of Ginny Weasley's face, he had drawn his and Susan's hands, with Susan demonstrating guitar-fingering. It was an odd image, full of fingers and knuckles, but he liked it.

After pinning the fingers picture up on his wall, Harry settled back at his desk and repeated forcefully to his disobedient fingers, "Ginny, Ginny, Ginny, Ginny!"

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 6 – A Fly in the Ointment

Over their morning cuppa, Remus took his time admiring Harry's latest drawings.

"These are really exceptional, Harry," he said proudly. "So, what time did you want to go into town?"

"Erm ... I'd like to be at the Leaky Cauldron by ten if that's okay." Harry was unsure how to say he wanted his guardian to take him into town, but then conveniently disappear so he could be alone with Natalie. "I can go on my own ... you don't need to ..."

"No, I'll take you," Remus said, politely but firmly. "How long do you think you'll be?"

"Oh ... see, about that," Harry said awkwardly, "I'm actually meeting someone, so several hours at least."

Remus considered that.

"A young lady?" he asked, to which Harry gave a slight nod. "So, I imagine my company is not required?" Remus noted, looking amused.

"Ah, no, actually," Harry agreed.

Remus cradled his coffee, thinking. "Okay, but promise me you'll keep to the pub or Diagon Alley, all right?"

"Absolutely," Harry said with relief.

With no dead boyfriends hanging around, he figured he might finally stand a chance of having a decent day out with a pretty girl. Taking particular care bathing and dressing that morning, Harry settled on long olive green cargo pants, a black fitted T-shirt, and new black trainers.

"Morning, Ginny! Good morning, Ronald!" he said brightly, dumping the drawings of the girls on the kitchen table.

"You're in a good mood this morning," Ginny observed, jumping off her stool to inspect her picture.

Remus strolled over and framed the girls' quarter-sized portraits and mounted them on the kitchen walls.

"They are *not* staying up there," Harry said forbiddingly.

"You up for some practice this morning?" Ron asked Harry.

"Maybe later. I'm heading into town again."

"What — more shopping?"

"Something like that," Harry said.

"All ready to go?" Hermione said brightly, sweeping into the kitchen, her handbag swinging jauntily over her shoulder. Harry's good mood instantly evaporated.

On the way to the train station, he drew Remus back and hissed, "I wasn't counting on *Hermione* coming!"

"Well," whispered the senior Marauder sympathetically, "I suppose I could try running a little interference for you when we get into town." Harry gave him a deeply grateful look. Remus chuckled and draped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Ah, to be young again."

"You're not *that* old, Moony," Harry said. It suddenly occurred to him he'd never heard mention of any particular lady in Remus's life.

As they approached the Leaky Cauldron, Remus engaged Hermione in a discussion of Anti-Sticking potions.

"I thought I'd try adding some Ellery Root," he remarked.

Hermione gasped in horror. "You can't do that! It'll completely nullify the Essence of Murtlap!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Remus. "Mundungus seemed to think —"

"Dung!" cut in Hermione indignantly. "You *cannot* be serious! Look, come down to the Apothecary with me and we'll consult a *real* expert!"

"Oh well, if you think that's best," Remus said as they entered the pub.

Hermione was still muttering her opinion of Dung's potion-making prowess under her breath as Remus slipped Harry a wink and suggested they might catch up later. Harry beamed at his guardian.

"If we miss you, Harry," Remus added, gently pushing a still-muttering Hermione towards the rear of the pub, "meet us back here at three."

Natalie, standing amongst a pile of dustbins, was clearly underwhelmed.

"I hope the tour gets better than this," she said with a laugh.

Harry tapped the appropriate sequence of bricks. They tumbled and swirled away revealing a bustling scene of charming old-world shops.

"Diagon Alley!" Harry declared happily.

The next few hours flew by, Natalie flitting with delight from one shop to another. Harry was deeply relieved the girl was having fun, though he could barely keep up with the constant stream of questions fired at him.

"What's down there?" Natalie asked, pointing down Knockturn Alley.

"Dark Magic stuff," Harry replied with a shrug.

"Oooh, can we look?" asked Natalie.

"Not a great idea," Harry said. "Besides, I promised my guardian I'd stick to Diagon Alley."

"He keeps pretty close tabs on you then," Natalie noted as they continued down the alley.

"Er ... yeah," admitted Harry, a bit embarrassed, "I'm not really allowed out much without a bodyguard these days."

Natalie looked curious at that, but any question she might have ventured was forgotten when she spotted the sign for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Squealing with delight, she was thoroughly enchanted by all the extravagant displays. As soon as the crowded shop emptied a little, Harry introduced her to the proprietors.

"Oh! You're twins!" Natalie cried delightedly.

"Natalie's come all the way from Canada to see your shop," said Harry. "I think she might like a tour through your merchandise."

George rubbed his hands together.

"It would be my very great pleasure!" Drawing the girl well-away from Harry, he began extolling the glories of portable swamps.

Bracing himself, Harry turned to Fred and said, "So, I hear we're having a party?"

Fred's face fell. "Who told you?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter, does it?" said Harry. "I mean, I think it's *fantastic*! I can't thank you guys enough!"

"It was Ron, wasn't it?" Fred demanded stonily. "I'll kill the little bugger!"

"Fred — mate ..." said Harry. "It's okay. I mean it's great. I'm really looking forward to it ..."

"If you'll excuse me, Harry," said Fred sternly. "Oi! George! Ron spilled about the party! I think the Hive just got its first volunteer!"

Fred disappeared into the back room. Harry grew very worried for Ron.

"Er ... Fred?" he said, eyeing the large, angrily buzzing hive Fred carried back to the counter. "What're you going to do?"

George answered for him. "Nothing to concern yourself with, old son."

Harry didn't believe that for a minute. "Yeah, well, I just got rid of dark vermin from the house. I don't need a *newinfestation*!"

"Mind the store for a bit, will you, Harry? There's a good lad," said Fred, strengthening his hold on the buzzing hive. Two loud cracks sounded and the boys were gone.

"What's going on?" Natalie asked, bemused.

"I don't even want to know," Harry said ruefully, slipping behind the counter to serve a customer.

Natalie collected a number of her own purchases then leaned over the counter to say leadingly, "Did I hear something about a party?"

"Er, yes, actually, tomorrow is my birthday," Harry said awkwardly. "My friends were trying to throw me a surprise party, but Ron let it slip the other night."

"Oh no!" Natalie cried, slapping her hands on the counter. "We're leaving tomorrow morning. They only run International Portkeys once a week between here and Quebec. You'll have to send me some photos!"

Just then, the twins, looking disturbingly cheerful, Apparated back into the shop. Fred's eyes were positively dancing as he scanned Natalie's selections.

"Excellent choices, Natalie!" he declared. "On the house I'd say, don't you think, George?"

"The least we can do for abandoning you!" George agreed, smiling hugely at Natalie. Leading her away, he gave her a demonstration of Permanent Bubbles bath gel. In seconds, the whole shop was awash with pink bubbles.

"Okay, Fred," Harry said fatalistically, punching one away, "what do I need to know?"

"Whatever do you mean, dear boy?" Fred asked innocently, placing a now very quiet hive down on the counter.

Harry crossed his arms sternly; it had taken him and Remus forever to clear the house of pests.

"They'd better be gone by tomorrow!"

"Fear not, young Harry," Fred said soothingly, "it's just a twenty-four hour thing."

George poked his head through a wall of bubbles.

"Erm, we didn't actually get an accurate time on that," he reminded Fred.

Harry groaned more loudly. "I did not need this!"

"Had to be done, Harry," Fred assured him. Harry just threw up his hands, sending bubbles scattering.

Preoccupied with thoughts of Ron Weasley, it wasn't until he heard the sound of girlish giggling that Harry remembered he was on a date.

"Natalie? You still in there somewhere?" he called out.

"This place is just amazing!" she declared happily. George beamed at her and swam an impromptu backstroke through the bubbles.

"Yeah, amazing," Harry agreed, eyeing George suspiciously. Reaching for Natalie's hand, Harry tugged her free of the bubbles. "Come on, you'll want to see the Owl Emporium. You can leave your stuff here. Cheers, lads!"

As Natalie and Harry and several fat bubbles escaped the shop, they almost collided with a group of girls, all of whom giggled madly on spotting Harry. Harry felt an unpleasant jolt in his stomach on seeing an awfully familiar face.

"Hello, Harry," Cho Chang said, blushing slightly as she smiled up at him. Her smile stiffened when she saw Natalie.

Harry scanned the group; there was no sign of Marietta, and Cho *had* accepted an invitation to his party.

"Hello, Cho," he said gamely. "How are you?"

"Well, thank you, and you?" she said reflexively.

"Good, thanks."

Harry followed Cho's gaze and felt an unworthy buzz of pleasure for her to see him with another girl — a very pretty girl. Then he realised he was still holding Natalie's hand and immediately dropped it, feeling oddly confused and uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Cho, this is Natalie Ramsay; Natalie is just visiting from Canada. Natalie, this is my ... erm ... this is Cho Chang."

Cho offered Natalie a cool nod. Cho's friends immediately surrounded the Canadian and peppered her with questions about French boys. An awkward silence fell between Cho and Harry.

"Been cleaning out the shops?" he said, indicating the large number of bags she was carrying.

"Does look like that," Cho admitted sheepishly. "I'm going away this weekend, so I needed some supplies."

Harry blinked at that; how could she possibly need so much stuff?

"Where are you headed?" he asked, curious as to what cover story she'd cook up.

"Oh, just a family thing; you know how it is," Cho said easily.

She smiled at Harry and Harry found a genuine smile to give back to her, relieved they were able to talk normally again.

"So I guess we won't be seeing you at the party," he said, feigning disappointment.

"Oh, you rat!" laughed Cho. She leaned closer and pushed her hand playfully against his chest. "You're not supposed to know about that!"

"So people keep telling me," said Harry.

He glanced down at her hand and stood a little straighter. A slightly dopey smile crept onto his face; Cho always smelled really good. Glancing over her shoulder, he saw Remus and Hermione further down the alley. Remus spotted him, too. With a wink to Harry, the man swiftly diverted Hermione into Flourish and Blotts. Grinning broadly now, Harry turned his attention back to Cho.

"I was hoping we might match up again — on the Quidditch pitch, I mean."

"That might be fun," Cho said coyly. Her fingertip took its time running down his chest a few inches before falling away. "Been a while, hasn't it."

Harry's brains took a moment to re-engage. "Oh, right ... yes, well, I had a little case of Umbridge-itis, but I'm all better now."

"Harry?" Natalie said, breaking free of Cho's friends. "What's Umbridge-itis?"

Harry and the Hogwarts girls all laughed.

"Sorry, Natalie," said Harry, "Umbridge was our headmistress last year. Foul piece of work. She banned me from playing Quidditch."

"Why did she ban you, by the way?" asked Cho curiously.

Harry turned his attention back to Cho. "Ah, little altercation with the ferret."

"Malfoy?" said Cho. "Oh yes, I remember now; it was after the Gryffindor / Slytherin match. I don't know why she banned you; you were clearly doing a public service." Cho frowned deeply. "When I think of what he and his little squad did to the DA ..."

Harry couldn't help but remember Marietta's key role in that whole sorry episode; he crossed his arms and looked down at his feet but said nothing. Cho seemed to come to the same point. Slipping her hand inside the crook of his elbow, she pulled him away from the others, and they leaned together against the twins' explosive window.

"Harry," Cho said softly, drawing even closer, "I ... I want you to know you were right about Marietta. I'm really sorry about all that."

"Thank you," he said gruffly, "that means a lot."

Cho gave him a huge smile and Harry felt a familiar flutter in the region of his stomach. She's with Corner, now, he reminded his stomach sternly.

"We were just heading up to Zelda's for lunch," Cho said. "Would you like to join us? Ah, Natalie, too, of course ..."

Harry had forgotten all about Natalie. He shook his head to clear it.

"Natalie, right. Ah, no, but thanks anyway. She doesn't have a lot of time to look around, so we should probably keep going."

Cho smiled and nodded to Harry, but the look she gave Natalie wasn't anywhere near as friendly. Natalie and Harry waved goodbye to the girls and continued down Diagon Alley.

"We could've stopped with them, if you wanted to," Natalie said, frowning slightly.

"No," Harry said blankly. "Oh, unless you want to, of course. We can still go back ..."

"Nah," Natalie said happily. "What's next?"

"Are you hungry?" Harry asked her.

Natalie wanted to try traditional English fast-food, so Harry chose the local chippie, *Mermaids*.

"But," Harry warned her, "you have to eat your fish and chips standing up and out of the newspaper or it doesn't count."

Harry took particular delight in eating off a greasy newspaper photograph of a deeply unimpressed Cornelius Fudge. Strolling down the alley, they passed Ollivander's wand shop just as Mr Ollivander, himself, was leaving the store, casting protection charms over his shoulder.

"Good afternoon, Mr Potter," Mr Ollivander said. His misty eyes travelled to Natalie. "Good afternoon, miss," he added politely, tipping his hat to her before hurrying away.

"Good afternoon, sir," Harry called after him and braced himself for Natalie's reaction.

"Did he say 'Potter'?" Natalie said curiously, looking at Harry as if for the first time.

"Ah ... yeah," Harry replied stiffly, bracing himself for the inevitable Boy-Who-Lived dramatics.

"Well, that explains the bodyguard thing," mused Natalie.

"Yeah ... I'm sorry, Natalie, I could've been more up front with you."

Natalie forked a hot chip and waved it from side to side to cool it. "No sweat, but I believe we have something in common."

"What's that?"

"Our godmother," Natalie said, popping the chip into her mouth.

Stunned, Harry tried to find his voice. "We have the same godmother? Who is she?"

Natalie looked confused. "What do you mean who is she? Elizabeth Ramsay, of course. You know, my Auntie Elizabeth."

Harry just stared at the girl. A large woman with three squabbling children struggled to get past them in the Alley. Harry pulled Natalie over to Mr Ollivander's window.

"Let's start this again," he said. "Your godmother is Elizabeth Ramsay?"

"Yes," said Natalie.

"What makes you think she's *my* godmother, too?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"Well," Natalie said uncertainly, "she told me — ages ago. You *are* the one with ..." She pointed vaguely to Harry's forehead.

"Yes," Harry said, lifting his fringe for her.

"I don't get it," Natalie said, growing upset. "My Aunt Elizabeth wouldn't lie about something like that."

"Wait, no, no," said Harry quickly, "I'm not saying she's lying — I've no idea who my godmother is; for all I know your aunt is telling the truth."

Natalie grew more confused. "How can you not know who your godmother is?"

Fair question, thought Harry, scratching his head. "I'm an orphan. I don't know that much about my family."

"I'm so sorry," said Natalie, her big blue eyes moistening. "I didn't realise ..."

"No — no — look, don't be upset; I'm glad you told me." Harry was desperate not to have *another* date with a girl end in tears. "Here, sit down; your fish'll get cold."

They sat down together on Ollivanders' stoop, eating their fish and chips in silence awhile before Harry ventured a question.

"So, how did your Aunt Elizabeth know my parents?"

"She grew up here," explained Natalie. "So did my dad; we all left England ten years ago."

"So they would've gone to Hogwarts?"

"Yeah, Aunt Lizzie and your Mom were pretty tight, I think."

Harry nodded; it was feasible. "What house was she in at Hogwarts?"

Natalie blinked. "House? Oh, I'm not sure ... Griffin-something maybe?"

Harry whistled under his breath then laughed a little. "And they say you shouldn't talk to strangers. You know, this is so weird; I just wrote to her in Montreal."

"Oh, she isn't in Montreal right now," Natalie volunteered helpfully. "She's working in Nova Scotia. Why were you writing to her?"

Harry was still stunned. He had a hundred questions, but they all boiled down to 'where has she been all my life', which didn't really seem polite to ask.

"Do you see a lot of her?" he asked instead.

"Not as much as I'd like," admitted Natalie. "Her work takes her to pretty remote places, and I'm at Peace River most of the year, but we write to each other a lot. And I went up to Nova Scotia and spent the weekend with her just before I — hang on, wasn't it your family she was trying to reach on that Muggle telephone thing? I distinctly remember her going on and on about some Dursey woman —"

"Dursley," Harry said, his insides going colder than his fish.

"Dursley! That's right! She was really worried about all the news reports coming through about You-Know-Who. Is it true you really saw him? Did he and Albus Dumbledore really have a full on duel? That must have been amazing!"

Natalie kept firing off questions, few of which registered in Harry's spinning brains. Aunt Petunia knew he had a godmother: a living, breathing godmother who was trying to reach him! She knew and she didn't tell him! All those years ...

"Harry? Are you okay?"

Harry shook himself back to the present. "Sorry?"

"No, I'm sorry," said Natalie contritely. "My mouth just runs off at full steam sometimes. No stopping it. You were asking about Auntie Lizzie ... Would you like me to pass on a message?"

A small, triumphant smile crept onto Harry's lips. In spite of his aunt's deception, he now knew he had a godmother.

"When you see her next, yeah. Just say Harry said hello, maybe she could drop me a line sometime? And you might want to mention that Muggle telephones — not a great idea."

The rest of the afternoon rapidly disappeared with visits to Quality Quidditch Supplies and the Owl Emporium. Whilst Natalie cooed over a tawny owl, Harry checked his watch: it was after three o'clock.

"I'm really sorry, Natalie, but I'm going to have to get back to the pub to meet my guardian. I'll just nip down and pick up your things from the joke shop."

"That's okay, I can do that later," Natalie said as they strolled past dangling caged-owls and out into the sunshine. "I'd like to look around some more before I head back."

"Oh, okay then," said Harry. He didn't know whether to shake her hand or kiss her or what. "Well, it was really a pleasure meeting you. I hope you'll keep in touch."

"Absolutely!" Natalie said. "And I'll be sure to pass on your message to our godmother."

"I'd really appreciate it," said Harry.

The two teenagers just stood there for a moment. Then, with a shy laugh, Natalie leaned in and kissed Harry's cheek.

"Happy birthday for tomorrow," she whispered in his ear. Harry smiled broadly and kissed her back.

"Thank you very much. Do you know," he confided, "that's the first birthday kiss I've ever had."

Farewelling the girl, Harry ran all the way back to the pub, his heart soaring. He'd done it! He'd really done it! He'd *finally* had a date that didn't end in tears or tantrums! He *knew* he had it in him!

Remus and Hermione were waiting for him at the pub, Hermione animatedly expressing her opinion on herbs with sedative properties, Remus propping his head up in both hands and grunting every now and then. He seemed very relieved to see Harry coming towards them. Making their way down Charing Cross Road to the tube station, Hermione turned to Harry to ask if he'd had fun. She left just enough time for Harry to nod before launching into a lengthy exposition on new potion ingredients.

Remus, heavily laden with Hermione's purchases, sidled up on Harry's other side and growled in his ear, "You owe me ... big time!"

Harry stifled a laugh. "I'll make you dinner. What's your favourite?"

Remus was well-pleased with this offer and spent the rest of the journey vacillating between beef stroganoff and lamb shanks. They stopped at the Tesco on the way home for groceries, and as they neared Black House, Harry's mind turned to thinking about Cho. Natalie, he chastised himself, Natalie — surrounded by bubbles. Then Harry remembered — the Hive!

"Ron might be in a bit of strife when we get home," Harry told Remus and Hermione. "I had to break it to the twins I knew about the party. They weren't too thrilled."

"What have they done?" Remus asked eagerly — a little *too* eagerly for Harry's liking.

"I'm not sure, but keep your wand handy — yeah?"

Opening the front door, they heard screams and rushed inside but it was only Mrs Black. The portrait's wailing escalated on seeing the newcomers.

"BLOOD TRAITORS!" she screeched, her impossibly lifelike eyes bulging madly. Painted serpents writhed around her feet, hissing and spitting at Remus. "VILE BEAST! RAVAGING MY HOME! DESECRAVING THE NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK! MUDBLOOD WHORE!" she screamed, jabbing a bony finger at Hermione.

"SHUT UP, YOU STUPID OLD BAT!" Harry yelled furiously.

Silence fell, startling everyone. Mrs Black gaped at Harry, fear writ large on her withered face. Her tattered drapes swished themselves shut and they heard no more from her. Remus quickly shepherded the teenagers away from the portrait and up the stairs. If Remus were a Muggle, Harry would've said he'd just seen a ghost.

"What did you say to her?" Hermione breathed in awe. Harry was as confused as everyone else. "You were yelling in Parseltongue," explained Hermione. "Didn't you realise that?"

Harry shook his head, bemused but impressed. He caught Remus staring at him.

"Sorry, Harry," Remus said, shaking his head wryly. "I knew you were a Parselmouth, but knowing it and hearing it hissed at full volume are two different things."

All was quiet above. Harry was unpacking groceries when Ginny, looking deeply smug, appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Where's Ron?" Hermione asked at once. "Is he okay?"

Ginny just giggled and ran back out of the room. Harry dropped his onions and dashed after her, Hermione close behind. Racing upstairs, they

heard a shower running. Harry thumped hard on the bathroom door, earnestly hoping Ron was getting rid of whatever it was that Fred and George left behind.

"You okay, mate?" Harry called out.

"Ron!" cried Hermione.

There was no answer. Harry looked around; Remus was leaning against the stair handrail, his arms crossed and his face lighted up with merry anticipation. Ginny was perched on the stairs, gleefully peeking through the balustrades. A loud thump followed by furious slapping sounds emanated from behind the bathroom door. Suddenly the water stopped running and all they could hear was a droning buzz.

"Ron!" Harry called out. "Mate! Are you okay?"

The bathroom door flew open. Harry and Hermione gaped. Remus burst out laughing. Ron stood before them, fully dressed and soaked to the skin, flapping his arms around his face as a swarm of fat, black and green flies attacked his head.

"Get 'em off me!" he wailed, twisting madly this way and that, arms flailing.

"Ginny?" Hermione called. "What are we dealing with?"

Ginny just giggled hysterically and retreated further up the staircase.

"Australian — *blowflies*!" Ron spat, coughing and spluttering. "Charmed — to — to — *fink* ..." Ron shut his mouth against swallowing more flies.

"Charmed to think he's their *queen*!" Ginny crowed from somewhere high above them.

"They won't — leave me — alone!" Ron yelled.

Harry and Hermione looked on in dismay as Ron continued flailing away at the air, at his face, at his ears. Remus was doubled over laughing.

"Stop laughing!" Harry demanded, screwing up his face in disgust as another fly flew into Ron's mouth. Hermione was busy wringing her hands.

"I don't know what spells we should use! Fred and George always booby trap their jokes to get even worse if you try to fix them!"

Regrettably, this was very true.

"Not that we have anyone willing to use their *wand*!" Harry growled at Remus, who was laughing so hard he was crying.

"*You're a Seeker aren't you!*" cried Ron, hitting himself in the face. "Catch the bloody things!"

Harry spent the next hour snatching blowflies from the air around Ron's head (and trying to ignore helpful instructions from Hermione).

"OW!" Ron cried (for about the tenth time) as Harry's fist connected with his face.

"Well, *hold still*, why don't you?" Harry groaned impatiently, swiping sweat from his eyes. He finally got the flies down to just a couple that dipped and swirled out of reach. "I'm going for a bath!" he declared, looking with disgust at his filthy hands and the fly-strewn floor. "And you!" he growled, jabbing a filthy finger towards Remus. "You can clean up this mess, if it's not too much trouble!"

Remus nodded meekly, but his eyes still looked way too happy.

"There are still two more," Hermione pointed out helpfully. "Or maybe not," she said quickly on seeing Harry's face.

Retreating to his bedroom, Harry decided to try out his new shower. His new private bathroom featured not only dozens of charmed bath and shower settings, but also boasted moving wall mosaics depicting scenes from ancient Greece. Harry peeled off his blowfly-soiled clothes, but not before checking the mosaic inhabitants of the bathroom were at least *feigning* sleep. Harry had laid down the law on bathroom etiquette the first night in his new bathroom and they mostly complied. Neptune was usually on Harry's side, and he was not above using his long trident to encourage obedience in the other mosaics.

"Hello!" piped up a cheerful voice from over the bath.

"Hi, Mirabella," said Harry, reaching over to give his pink and purple, mosaic haddock a tickle. "Eyes shut now," he reminded her.

Mirabella giggled and obediently hid under her favourite rock. Harry finished stripping off and climbed into the cylindrical shower recess. He squinted at the dial, which was positioned at face height before him: blue for pressure, red for temperature, and a gold switch to flick between Water and Air. Harry couldn't see any plumbing outlets except for the drain hole. No taps, no showerhead. He flicked the switch to Water and slim green tubes rose out of the floor, climbing like vines up the walls of the cubicle. The vines joined above his head and formed a red shower rose. Harry chose Hot But Not Too Hot and All Over Energetic. The tubes swelled, and water suddenly erupted from holes scattered up and down the vines. Startled, but quite liking the sensation of water coming at him from every angle, Harry relaxed, rather enjoying his watery massage.

When he was finished showering, Harry flicked the gold switch to Air, and the water in the vines disappeared. He set the temperature to Warm and Fuzzy and the pressure to Zephyr. A very pleasant sensation of warm air blew softly from the holes in the vines, quickly drying the lad off. His hair was still a bit damp so he upped the pressure to Intense. Struggling to pick himself up off the floor, he hastily dialled the pressure back to Brisk

on Top.

Fishy giggling sounded from high above the bath.

Ron was still twitchy that evening. In an effort to cheer him up, Harry broke out his stash of Chocolate Frogs and they camped out on Harry's bed, eating frogs and looking for new trading cards.

"Look, here's one for you," said Ron. "Herpo the Horrible: First known creator of the Basilisk."

"Cheers, Herpo," Harry said dryly.

He reached for a card Ron discarded: another Dumbledore. He grinned as he read the familiar biography. Professor Dumbledore still enjoyed chamber music and tenpin bowling. Harry opened another card and deftly flicked the frog into Ron's waiting mouth.

"Oooh, Mirabella Plunkett!" said Harry. "I've been looking for her."

"What she do?" Ron mumbled, poking a squirming leg into his mouth.

"Fell in love with a merman against her family's wishes and turned herself into a haddock, never to be seen again."

"Whatever rocks your boat," Ron said as he opened another packet. "Elizabeth Ramsay — never heard of her." His frog whizzed straight past Harry's ear.

"What!" Harry grabbed the card, but the woman had already wandered out of sight. He read her bio aloud. "Elizabeth Ramsay: Creator of the Wolfsbane Potion. The Canadian Auror's hobbies include swing dancing and working with miniatures."

"She created Lupin's potion? Cool," Ron said, nodding approvingly, then he lunged across the mattress. "I think he's under the bed."

"Yeah," Harry said absently.

Elizabeth Ramsay wandered back into frame and smiled shyly at Harry. Blue-eyed and blonde, Harry thought she looked like an older, somewhat faded, version of her bubbly niece. So, this is my godmother, he thought, blowing out his cheeks. He wouldn't want to admit it to anyone, but he sure could have used a godmother growing up — anyone, really. Just one person who might have let him know he wasn't completely alone in the world, that maybe he didn't deserve to be locked up in a cupboard all those years. Harry squinted more closely at the tiny portrait; he felt sure he'd seen her before.

"Found him!" came a muffled voice from under the bed.

Leaving Ron to liberate more frogs, Harry stood over his desk and opened his family photo album then flicked through the pages until he found the shot Remus had taken. His parents' wedding party stood smiling and waving at him from in front of a giant yew Harry hadn't noticed before. He held the Frog Card against the blonde bridesmaid; it was her all right. She looked so happy back then, not a care in the world. Her Frog Card showed a very different picture. Although she was smiling, there was something old and sad in her eyes, as if she didn't laugh as often as she should — and a defeated kind of look that reminded Harry of Remus. A horrible thought crept into Harry's mind and refused to leave. Remus had been so distraught when he saw the envelope Harry had addressed to Elizabeth ... what if *Remus Lupin* was the reason she invented the Wolfsbane Potion? Did he bite her? Did he kill — did he eat! — someone close to her?

"You okay?" Ron called from the bed. Hunched over his desk, Harry wavered a moment then decided to keep quiet about his godmother until he had a few answers.

With one fluid movement, he turned and lunged at Ron — and caught one of the last two blowflies, but the very last remained as elusive as ever.

Ron named him Bruce.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 7 – The Wheel of Destruction

On Friday morning, Harry was already awake and in his wingchair when Remus appeared at his door, juggling two teacups in front of him and something large and awkward behind his back.

“It’d help if you closed your eyes,” he said wryly.

Harry obediently squeezed shut his eyes and grinned hugely as something smooth cool and heavy was placed across his lap. A twang sounded. Harry’s fingers found strings and a long neck.

“Um … football?”

“You peeked!” Remus said, messing the boy’s hair. “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Harry beamed at a handsome tan and walnut-coloured guitar. “*Brilliant!* Thanks, Moony!”

“I’m afraid it’s second hand,” admitted Remus.

“You’d never know,” Harry said truthfully, holding it up admiringly.

Although he could see it wasn’t brand new, there was barely a scratch on it. It looked to have been cleaned and polished to within an inch of its life. Harry didn’t even want to think of how many orchids it cost.

“And there was no case,” Remus continued apologetically, “but I’m assured it has never been whacked over anyone’s head.”

Harry laughed at that. He strummed the guitar, relishing the resonating, tuneful sound. “It’s fantastic! Thank you so much!”

Remus rocked on his heels, well pleased. “Bill Weasley helped me pick it out. He seemed to know a lot about it.”

Harry tried a few of the chords Susan Bones taught him. To his delight, he produced *real* music. Not a lot of it, perhaps, but it was definitely recognisable as music.

“Keep that up — I might just retire my earplugs,” Remus said teasingly.

Just then, Ron and Hermione came bounding noisily into the room with more presents for the birthday boy.

“Or not,” Remus whispered to Harry.

From Ron, Harry received a bag of joke products and sweets, from Hermione, an intricately carved chest with layers of charmed compartments to hold his letters and keepsakes.

“Everybody needs a place for their treasures,” she said fondly.

Remus went off to organise breakfast, and Hermione raced after him, determined he follow her instructions to the letter for a ‘healthy birthday breakfast’ full of fruit and yogurt. Her constant vigilance freed Ron and Harry to vanquish Ron’s magical sweets in peace.

Harry never had such a happy birthday morning. At lunchtime, he even received a guitar lesson from Bill Weasley. Heading into the drawing room, Harry and Bill discovered the twins had been busy. Balloons and sparkling party decorations filled the room, many of which spun and honked at you when you passed by, along with brightly-coloured banners such as: ‘Potterfest16!’, ‘He-who-kicks-Voldemort’s-butt’, ‘Marauders Rule!’, ‘Scars R Us’, and ‘Sooo not the Heir of Slytherin!’

“Hey! Who made up that one?” Harry complained, pointing out ‘Dementors’ Tasty Treat’!

Bill laughed and pushed him towards the piano, where his first lesson was in using the keyboard to tune a guitar. He also passed on some much-needed tips on chord diagrams, time signatures, and other basics. The Weird Sisters’ songs were still well beyond Harry, but he relished hanging out with the pony-tailed, fang-earring wearing, Treasure Hunter. Bill was just so — so cool! He never made him feel like a dumb kid. He would even invite his opinion, as if asking an equal. They were still going when Tonks arrived.

She stood awkwardly in the doorway and called out, “Happy birthday! Safe to come in?”

Harry elected to block out the memory of their last encounter (she’d brought him a present). Opening her gift, he found an old-fashioned brass door-bolt, much like the kind used on a bathroom door. There was a note:

This bolt will automatically engage whenever you are in a compromising situation.

Love, Tonks!!

Harry laughed out loud: just what he always wanted.

Dressing for the party proved more difficult than Harry expected. He finally settled on a black linen shirt and black trousers and shoes. It just felt right, somehow, subdued for Sirius — but cool, like Bill. He rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows, like Bill did, and took a shot at taming his hair, dragging a wet comb through it this way and that.

"It keeps sticking up," Mirabella observed helpfully.

"Thanks," Harry grunted, pulling harder.

"It's kind of like a peacock," she said dreamily. "I like peacocks ... all those pretty green eyes ..."

"I am not a peacock!" grumbled Harry, though his hair, at least, seemed inclined to disagree.

Before heading downstairs, Harry picked out some family photos to take with him. The top of the piano seemed a good spot for his parents and Sirius to enjoy the party. He looked for a photo of Remus amongst Sirius's collection, and found one, but Peter Pettigrew was in the photo, too, which didn't please Harry at all. He'd definitely need to get a new one. Down in the festive drawing room, he was just arranging his family across the piano when Potterfest16! exploded into life with guests tumbling out of thin air, broomsticks and luggage flailing.

"HARRY!" they shouted, thoroughly testing the new Charmed Dumbers installed to keep noise inside the room. "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

What followed was but a joyful blur of hugs and handshakes and high-pitched squeals of girlish laughter. Harry couldn't stop smiling. With the exception of Luna Lovegood, who was in Scandinavia, and Marietta Edgecombe, who was very much not invited, all the DA members were present, as were Fleur, Tonks, Bill, Charlie, Oliver Wood, and Viktor Krum, the latter two now playing first grade together for Puddlemere United. Everyone jumped and laughed when a loud gong sounded. Resplendent in matching lime-green top hats, Fred and George swiftly assumed command of festivities, reeling off lists of warnings and party games as if briefing the guests for a military campaign.

"Mayhem is serious business," Fred declared solemnly, pacing like a general before his troops, "but we know you've got it in you!"

Mad-Eye Moody just grunted and continued strolling through the crowd, casually summoning contraband alcohol from disappointed boys' bags.

"Now, while you're off dumping your gear," George said, clapping his hands and grinning wickedly, "we'll be setting up the Wheel of Destruction — no exceptions!"

Groans and laughs sounded from pockets of the room.

"What did George say?" Harry asked Michael Corner over the escalating hubbub.

"You'll find out soon enough, mate," Michael said with a wink, leaving Harry to idly wonder if he'd be needing a boat to punt through what was left of his house by the time the twins were through. He could hardly wait!

Leaving Ron to deal with the boys, Harry escorted his female guests to their third-floor dormitory opposite his and Remus's bedrooms. The girls gasped with delight at all the exotic beds. Then they saw their drawings and there were renewed squeals of pleasure. Comparing beds and portraits, the girls were oblivious to their host, who leaned casually against the wall, beaming at them.

"Harry! Did you do this?" Parvati Patil demanded in disbelief, holding up her portrait. "It's beautiful!"

"So's the subject," Harry said simply.

Parvati dissolved into giggles and showed off her drawing to Lavender Brown. Harry grinned; he'd only meant the drawing showed an accurate memory of Parvati, but it felt rather cool making a girl blush. He looked on as Cho Chang dived onto her feathery swan bed and shrieked with laughter, then he held his breath as she reached up and pulled down her drawing for a closer look. A slow smile grew on her face and she rolled off the bed and came over to him.

"I just love my bed!" she said happily, hugging him. Surprised but pleased, Harry returned the hug. Pulling back, but not quite letting him go, Cho asked about her drawing.

"It's from the first time I saw you when we played Quidditch together."

Cho grew misty-eyed. "And you've had it all this time ... it's just wonderful, Harry."

Harry didn't think it wise to reveal he'd only drawn it a few days ago — and needed to go back that far to find a memory without her crying.

"You can keep it, if you like," he offered, "I can always do another one."

Cho positively glowed.

Angelina Johnson held up a bathrobe and pyjamas from the end of her bed.

"Look at this!" she called to the girls. "It says Dumbledore's Army! These are great!"

The guests' DA robes were all in assorted colours, with an embroidered phoenix crest on the breast pockets. Harry was pleased to see the girls making a fuss over them.

"Conjured for you by Dumbledore himself!" he declared, and they continued the tour, catching up with the boys on the way downstairs.

Gossip had already spread about Harry's indoor Quidditch pitch and the guests were well-impressed with the vast room and charmed sky, but they hadn't yet seen what was in the basement — no one had — Harry made sure of that.

"Time to tiptoe," he pleaded.

The group dutifully tiptoed after him, eyeing with some trepidation the '*QUIET!!! Screaming banshee sleeping!!!*' sign on the curtains concealing Mrs Black. Stopping at the door to the basement, Harry double-checked its Dumber was at the strongest setting. He led the group down the stone steps and waited at the closed lower door.

"Are we all here?" he asked, in a low voice. "Can someone close the top door?" Crammed in together on the stairs, nervous giggles and whispers started. Harry grinned up at his guests and said, "Dumbledore did this, I swear, I kid you not!"

He swung the door open, flicked on the lights then stood aside for the guests to file past him. There were roars of laughter and squeals of delight as the group beheld a brand new, state-of-the-art tenpin bowling alley.

Dumbledore had set up two lanes, side-by-side, complete with scoring seats, ball return, and charmed scoreboards. The whole room had the look and feel of 1940s' retro Americana. Shiny-red benches curved in tiers around the bowling end of the room. Harry hung back as the pure-blooded amongst his friends tried to work out how to play the strange Muggle game. Ernie Macmillan made a spectacular running-dive for the pins before Justin Finch-Fletchley pointed out the bowling balls. Hermione seemed the most comfortable with the game and tried to show the others how to play, taking several strikes in a row, but only the Muggle-related guests appeared impressed.

"Dunno why you'd wanna play a stupid Muggle game anyway," Ron grizzled, wincing as his fingers got stuck in the ball, "it's useless." He swatted at the air. "Clear off, Bruce."

"I like to learn ..." Viktor ventured, but Hermione was busy glaring at Ron.

"Just because you can't just wave your wand around doesn't make something useless!" she declared, flinging her hand around for effect. She spun around on Viktor, her eyes blazing. "Here, Viktor," she said, yanking his thumb from his ball, "I would *love* to show you!"

The ball fell on Viktor's foot, but he didn't seem to notice.

Harry didn't fancy the way Ron was glaring at Viktor's backside and testing the weight of his ball.

"Time to go back upstairs," he declared quickly.

He held the door open for a group of the girls, and as he trailed behind half-a-dozen pairs of shapely legs, Harry found himself very glad, for the first time, that the stone steps were so steep.

Up in the ground-floor dining room, all trace of the Order of the Phoenix had been camouflaged and Mrs Weasley's delectable party food was eagerly set upon. The food was charmed to float freely along the table giving everyone a chance at their favourite dishes. Harry grinned at Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, who were bouncing curry-pies over the head of a worried Neville Longbottom. Harry laughingly flicked mini cream puffs into Ron's open mouth. He didn't miss — much. Milling around, saying a proper hello to his guests, Harry spotted Susan Bones at the end of the room talking to Remus, and he picked his way around the table to greet her (and maybe even score a birthday kiss). Alas, she merely smiled and wished him a happy birthday.

"So, do you know about this Wheel of Destruction thing?" Harry asked Remus, who was enjoying one of Molly Weasley's pork pies.

"Oho!" said Remus, licking off his fingers, "they're setting that up already? Excellent!"

"What is it?" pressed Harry.

Remus's eyes twinkled. "But that would ruin the surprise."

"Tell me!" Harry demanded, laughing.

"Ah, let's just say it's a little treat from Messrs Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs."

"It's one of yours? What — does it blow up or something?"

"No, no," said Remus, "nothing like that. Let's say the destruction is of a more — shall we say — *personal* nature."

"Would we be doing magic?" Susan asked, plucking a chocolate-dipped strawberry from the air.

"No, it's the Wheel that reads the cravings of the group. Mind you," Remus said, nodding to Harry, "given your history ... well, I wouldn't be wishing too hard for anything."

"You blow up one Muggle ..." Harry said, shaking his head. Drawing Susan well away from Remus, he confided in the girl's ear, "She really did deserve it, you know."

Harry was rewarded with a satisfying giggle, but then he happened to look down. The floating melange of party food thinned, revealing a birthday cake in the shape of a large lightning bolt. He felt Susan tense as well.

"D'you like the cake, Harry?" Tonks called out cheerfully. "My mum made it!"

Harry looked down the table at her happy face and tried to smile.

"Oh, right," he said, raising his drink to her, "uh, it's really ... uh ... please thank her for me."

Remus handed Harry a knife and lighted the candles with a flourish of his wand. The crowd started singing *Happy Birthday*, but Harry cut them off. Slamming his knife through the middle of the cake, he pushed the two flaming halves apart.

"Ah, Harry?" Remus said, chuckling, "that happens *after* you blow the candles out."

"It's Neville's birthday, too," Harry pointed out, beckoning his dorm-mate to join him.

Fresh congratulations poured in from around the table, and Neville blushed to the roots of his hair when his cheeks were kissed simultaneously by Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. Colin Creevey captured the moment with a great flash of his camera, and the room sang a fresh round of *Happy Birthday*.

"Ready, Neville?" Harry said as the clapping died down.

Together, the boys each blew out one end of the cake. Harry sliced into his end and handed the knife over for Neville to do the same. Cheers and calls of "Speech! Speech!" echoed around the room. After thanking everyone, especially Mrs Weasley for all the food, Harry turned towards Remus.

"I don't know how you managed to pull all this off," he said, "but I really appreciate it, thank you so, so much." Harry smiled around the room, waiting for the applause to die down again. "Now *these* two," he said, nodding down the table to Fred and George, "I'm very grateful for all their brilliant work in the poolroom, and for this party, but I have to admit I'm a little scared right now about whatever this wheel thingy is they're setting up."

There was laughter at that, but George held up his hands, a butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth expression on his face.

"Harry, Harry," he tutted, shaking his head sadly, "don't you trust us by now?"

Leading his guests back to the drawing room, Harry spied the presents on top of his piano and smiled to himself; even Dudley would be jealous of this haul.

"How about some music, Harry?" prompted Lee Jordan, rubbing his hands together. "What takes your fancy?"

"Oh, you choose," said Harry. "The song that's playing sounds good."

"What song?" Lee said blankly.

"The Sinatra one," Harry said.

Lee gave him an odd look. "Er, Harry, mate, the music box isn't even turned on yet."

Sure enough, there was no sound coming from the great brass-horn of the state-of-the-art music box they'd rented for the party. Harry frowned; he really didn't like hearing things no one else could. There was some hissing in the singing, as if from a radio or an old vinyl record. It sounded like ... no, it couldn't be ...

Following the singing to the piano, Harry rifled amongst the presents, at last locating the source: a sagging, lidded basket. Curious, he lifted the lid.

"*Fly me to the Moon ...*" crooned a black and white Diamond Python. Harry burst out laughing. "Do you *mind!*" hissed the snake.

"Sorry," Harry said, delighted, "you surprised me."

"Harry? Why are you hissing?" Ron looked over Harry's shoulder and gasped. "Crikey!"

"Oooh! Are we opening presents now?" Parvati cooed. She peeked over Harry's other shoulder and shrieked.

"Close the lid, boy, close the lid!" demanded the snake.

"Right, sorry," Harry apologised. The lid went back on and Harry looked around sheepishly at the gathering crowd. "Okay," he said, unable to find a card, "who gave me the snake?"

"Snake!" yelped Viktor. His hawklike eyes scanned the floor fearfully.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Viktor," Ron said, smirking at the Bulgarian's discomfort, "it's safely tucked away."

"Yes, well, he will be shortly," Harry said. "Back in a tick."

Harry scooped up the basket and headed for the kitchen, where he set it down on the counter and lifted the lid again.

"Sorry about that," Harry started to say then looked around as Remus came into the room. "Do you know anything about this?" Harry asked him.

"Yes, actually," he admitted. "Can you guess?"

"Hagrid?"

"Got it in one," said Remus. "There's a card and instructions around somewhere."

"Uh, *h ello*?" said the snake a trifle impatiently.

"Oh, right, hello," Harry said to the snake. "My name's Harry. How do you do?"

The snake rose two feet into the air and swayed a little from side to side.

"Very well thank you," it said pleasantly. "My name is Frank."

"Frank?" said Harry, trying not to laugh.

"Yes, well, perhaps it wasn't my *first* name," said Frank, sounding a tad miffed, "but it's the one I'll answer to now."

"Frank it is," agreed Harry. "Frank, this is Remus." He added in English, "Remus, this is Frank."

Frank nodded regally to the man. Remus offered a polite bow in return. Frank let Harry pull his body out of the basket and onto the black-granite counter. His scales felt smooth and dry, but flexible, too. They made diamond patterns all the way along his seven-foot body, giving him a silvery sheen. In the centre of his wedge-shaped head were four red scales in the shape of a diamond. He was really quite beautiful. Frank's red tongue and hazy-blue eyes were examining Harry just as curiously.

"You're quite a handsome specimen," Frank observed genially.

Harry snorted a laugh. "Thanks. You, too. Listen, I'm going to have to leave you for a bit. Can I get you some food? What do you like to eat?"

"Ooh, a little chicken mince would be lovely," said Frank, his mood clearly improving with the prospect of food. "That large man kept trying to feed me dead rats. Can you *imagine*?"

Harry just grinned. He retrieved a chicken fillet from the fridge and cut it into smallish pieces.

"Is this okay?" he checked, placing the bowl before the snake. Frank sniffed delicately at it with his forked tongue.

"Hmmm, yes," he hissed contentedly.

"He likes chicken," Harry told Remus, shrugging at the quizzical look on the man's face.

"I do," Frank said serenely; he clearly understood English.

Swaying gracefully in the air, Frank touched his smooth nose to Harry's chin and rubbed it affectionately. A rather silly grin grew on Harry's face to own a living creature he could actually have a conversation with.

"Harry?" called Cho from the doorway. "Oh, there you are. We wondered where you'd gotten to."

Harry grinned and beckoned her over. "Cho, meet Frank."

Cho eyed the snake briefly and with clear distaste. "Will you be very long?"

"Nice to meet you, too," Frank sniffed, sinking almost invisibly into the black counter.

"I'll be right there," said Harry. "I just need to put him somewhere safe."

Hedwig was half-dozing in her cage when her master entered the room carrying a python. Instantly alert, she hopped out and sought higher ground: perching atop her cage, her talons curling and uncurling around its metal stringers. Harry set Frank down on the desk and addressed the python in English.

"Frank, this is my owl, Hedwig. She's *very* important to me..." Hedwig thrust out her chest proudly. "She's *strictly* off limits, okay?"

Frank reared back, aghast. "What on earth do you think I would do to her? I'd never touch her!" he hissed emphatically. "It's *me* you should be worried about!"

Harry sighed with relief and said, "Sorry, okay then." He turned to Hedwig, stroked her feathers and said in a soothing voice, "Hedwig, this is Frank; he won't hurt you."

Hedwig delivered to Harry a look of deep disdain and fluttered down to the desk for a closer look. She advanced cautiously, gracefully extending one taloned claw towards the snake. Frank slid forward and rubbed his head against the soft feathers on her leg. Retreating, he curled up contentedly and gave Harry a decidedly smug wiggle of his head.

"I think she likes me," he confided.

Grinning, Harry dashed from the room, yelling over his shoulder, "Be good!"

"Finally!" said Cho, pulling Harry into the drawing room. "We've been waiting for you to come back and open your presents!"

"Oh, we don't have to do that right now," said Harry.

Cho smiled coyly. "It's either that or they'll start the Wheel of Destruction."

Harry grimaced. "Presents it is."

Light pop was now playing on the music box. Lee was listening intently and nodding a lot as one person after another gave detailed song requests. The girls were curled up on the sofas. Harry settled cross-legged on the rug amongst them.

"This is from all the DA boys!" Colin Creevey said breathlessly, springing forward like a jack-in-the-box. "Everyone chipped in, but I picked it out!"

Inside a small box, Harry found potions vials and a black case about the size and shape of a Muggle calculator. There didn't seem to be any hinge or latch to open it up. Colin immediately launched into an animated explanation of features, modes, and speeds.

"Colin — Colin — breathe!" Harry ordered. "What is it?"

"Oh," Colin said, surprised. "It's a Snaparazzi 630!"

Several of the girls gasped in delight.

"A snapper-what?" said Harry.

"It's a camera," Colin gushed, "but not just *any* camera; it's got all these fantastic charms! You just tell it what you want and it seeks out and takes the photos *for you!* Look, I'll show you. Hold the camera up flat," Colin instructed, demonstrating with his own upturned hand. "You need to tap twice and say 'I want to know.'"

Harry did this and the camera floated off his hand. Then a large, green eye — Harry's eye — blinked open on one side of the case. Then the camera started drifting around the room, twisting and turning, literally looking for something.

"When the eye b-blinks," said Colin, his chest heaving, "it's taking a photo." Right on cue, the camera winked at Harry then floated away. "And there's developing potions in the box," Colin added.

Harry was well impressed. "Cheers, lads," he said with a bit of a wave. "Love it!"

The girls came forward with predictably girly gifts. From Susan, he received a dark green sweater, "Excellent colour," Harry said with a wink. She also gave him a beginners' guitar lesson book. It had a picture of a pointy-toed minstrel on the cover, merrily strumming a guitar.

Harry smirked at the title. "Fretful Favourites?"

"I know," Susan said wryly, "but the exercises are really good."

"Cool, thanks very much," said Harry. "I'll try them out tomorrow."

At least he knew he'd use Susan's gifts; Hannah inflicted a set of hair-care products on him.

"Geoffrey swears by them," she assured him.

In similar vein, Lavender's gift was a year's worth of haircuts by her own hand. Harry wished her luck. Parvati gave him a black, flat-leather wristband with a stone disc centred on the band. Without asking, she tied it straight onto his wrist. Colours immediately started swirling within the cloudy stone.

"It changes colour with your moods," Parvati explained. Harry eyed the moodstone warily, fairly certain he did not want to be broadcasting his feelings so publicly.

"What do the different colours mean?" he asked her.

"That depends on you," she said happily. "It's different from person to person. It might take a fair while to get a fix on you, months even, if you don't feel very much very often."

"Right. Well, thank you," Harry said, trying to sound sincere.

Parvati leaned in and embraced him warmly. Harry was a little surprised, but he had few objections to pretty girls wanting to give him a hug.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Cho said, somehow managing to give Parvati a chilly glare and Harry a huge smile at the same time.

Displacing Parvati, Cho sat close to him on the floor and placed her present in his lap. The camera drifted past, its green-eye winking serenely at her. Her gift was a black leather satchel, Harry's initials discreetly attached in silver on one corner of the flap.

"I charmed it to be light, no matter what you put in it," Cho said, "within reason."

Smiling broadly, Harry hugged Cho and risked a kiss on her cheek, too.

"Thank you," he murmured into her ear, taking a birthday-boy's liberty of holding onto her for as long as he thought he could get away with.

More gifts were opened: Quidditch books, signed posters, and various games and novelties, but it was Viktor Krum's gift (or the note attached, more correctly) that just stopped Harry dead.

Thank you for stopping me that night.

Viktor

A shadow passed over Harry's face when he recalled the night of the third task. Cedric, writhing in agony as Viktor, under an Imperius Curse, cast Unforgivables at him. Harry looked up into Victor's sad, hooded eyes and nodded solemnly. Folding the note, he pushed it deep into his pocket. Then he opened the gift.

"No ..." Harry breathed, awestruck.

Very gingerly, he pulled from the wrappings a Bulgarian robe with *KRUM* emblazoned across the back. Blood and dirt were caked here and there — Viktor's signature was on it, too. Every boy in the room groaned in appreciation.

"I think you maybe see World Cup?" Viktor suggested with a lopsided grin.

Harry's mouth worked up and down, but he couldn't seem to get any sound to come out. Still grasping the Bulgarian robe, he clambered to his feet to heartily pump Viktor's hand and stammer his thanks. Viktor stood back with his arms crossed, a look of pleasure softening his fierce face.

Turning to an equally dumbfounded Ron, Harry breathed, "Can you believe this?"

Ron's eyes were wide as saucers. He just shook his head, his hand hovering near the robe but not daring to touch it.

"This goes straight to the poolroom!"

With cake and presents out of the way, the chaperones and older party-guests retired to the poolroom, leaving the teens to the twins' tender mercies. Excited mutterings sounded as the boys rolled a great spoked wheel into the room and mounted it on the wall: the Wheel of Destruction! Labels such as Truth, Revelation, Song, Dance, Impersonation, Hidden Talent, Dare, Snog, and more were repeated at intervals on the outer rim. There seemed to be an awful lot of Truths and Snogs. Harry thought it definitely sounded like something his father and Sirius would cook up. He found Ron, and they squeezed in amongst the boys on the floor — the girls were already hogging all the sofas.

"Choose your victim!" George ordered the crowd, and he spun an inner, yellow wheel. When it stopped, a name in bold red lettering appeared.

"**HARRY!**" squealed the girls.

"And what you want from him!" called out Fred, and he gave the outer Wheel a mighty spin.

"**Revelation!**" George and Fred called out together when the Wheel stopped.

Harry sighed inwardly; he couldn't say he hadn't been expecting this.

"Make it good one, Harry, there's a lad, or we'll be here all night," George suggested helpfully.

The guests immediately yelled out their suggestions (all of which related to "You-Know-Who"). Harry stared up at the ceiling, trying to think of something unimportant but still newsworthy. Just then, one of the banners changed to, 'Sooo not the Heir of Slytherin!' Harry grinned at it.

"Hmmm," he said, casting a mischievous glance towards the Hufflepuffs. "There is *something* I was never terribly keen to make public knowledge." Everyone leaned forward eagerly. "There was a time," Harry said, shaking his head, "when even I thought I might be the Heir of Slytherin."

Startled gasps and laughs met this revelation.

"Why?" Hannah said. "Because you're a Parselmouth?"

"You are Parselmouth?" blurted Viktor.

"Yeah, I am," Harry said to Viktor. "But no," he added to Hannah, a wry smile playing on his lips, "not *only* because of that." Harry looked around at his avidly listening audience. "This goes back to first year ..." He toyed with his water bottle and took a swig, drawing it out for effect. "The Sorting Hat was very insistent I would do great things ..." There were resigned nods at this. Harry cast a lazy eye around the room and added serenely, "In Slytherin!"

Harry could not have hoped for a better reaction. Laughter and dismay erupted around the room.

"No!" Ron breathed, aghast.

"How d'you end up in Gryffindor then," Seamus called out.

"Had a little chat with the Hat and asked it not to put me there," said Harry simply. "Then down in the Chamber of Secrets, the Hat brought me the sword of Godric Gryffindor and I finally knew for sure I was sorted into the right house."

"I wonder what Snape would've done to you in Slytherin?" Neville snickered.

Harry shuddered. "Give me *newnightmares* why don't you ..." He looked around the group, smirking at the dazed faces. "So, worthy revelation?"

"You are Parselmouth?" Viktor repeated, still in shock.

"All right!" Harry declared with satisfaction. "*Two* revelations!"

"And that's enough!" Hermione blurted in a high-pitched voice. "Harry doesn't need to be interrogated about Lord Voldemort on his birthday, does he?" she challenged the room.

There were a few muttered grumbles, but enough of Harry's guests agreed with Hermione to ensure the Wheel of Destruction spun its merry way through new victims and challenges — mostly Dares involving joke-shop merchandise. Harry suspected the entrepreneurial twins were not above exploiting a roomful of unpaid test dummies, and soon the teens were tripping over slinky ears, plaited nostril-hair, bouncing eyeballs, and some sticky, pink substance that might have been Lavender at some point.

Predictably, the girls were the first to grow weary of joke shop goo and mess, but the boys outnumbered them. To be fair, Ernie did make an excellent Mr Potato Head, and the girls had a good deal of fun moving his body parts about. But the challenges weren't confined to joke-shop products. When Ron's left nostril returned to normal size, he was dared to let Lee Jordan's tarantula crawl inside his mouth for ten seconds (he didn't last one). Hannah Abbott was dared to do the same and lasted eight then disappeared from the party for some time in order to brush her teeth and gargle very thoroughly. She wasn't the only one to 'need the loo' for long stretches of time in an effort to evade the Wheel.

Ginny alone seemed impervious to the Wheel, though Harry did not find this surprising — none of the boys wanted to risk the wrath of so many big brothers, especially when two of them were Fred and George. The twins were at their flamboyant best, lifting jinxes only when they felt like it and relishing every cringe-inducing moment, insisting it was 'only a game'. Harry spotted the three Ravenclaw boys tightly shutting their eyes, their foreheads creased in concentration. When the Wheel next stopped, the twins stared and everyone else laughed.

"George!" chorused the Ravenclaw boys gleefully.

George and Fred exchanged a significant look and both could be seen muttering under their breaths whilst the Wheel of Destruction decided George's fate. The outer Wheel stopped on Snog. George rubbed his hands with glee.

"*Excellent* game this!" he declared. "Let's see, let's see," he said, making a show of parading around the room, but his eyes were kept returning to only one girl, "if the lovely Miss Chang would oblige?"

Rowdy cheers and laughter erupted, the male half of the room aggressively goading the girl to comply. Cho blushed deeply. Harry's stomach clenched. *She wouldn't!*

Apparently, she would.

"There's a time rule young lovers," warned Fred, checking his watch. "One minute! No more, no less."

Gleeful catcalls and whistles rent the air as Cho and George kissed, George pulling the girl into him so enthusiastically her feet left the ground and she was obliged to cling to him. Jealousy stabbed at Harry's chest as he tried not to watch, tried to tell himself he didn't give a fig who she got with. That he had no hold over her. That they were history. That he was well over her anyway. That she could snog anyone she wanted. That it was just a stupid game. A really *stupid* game.

Sixty seconds never took so long. Harry was convinced Fred gave them at least twice that! Cho and George finally broke apart, George quite reluctantly, and the Wheel of Destruction spun to life again.

"PARVATI!" boomed Fred.

George still had his eyes fixed on Cho, who was blushing and hugging a pillow. When Parvati's task appeared, Fred leered and the room bubbled with laughter — with giggles from the girls and sniggers from the boys. Fred waved a hand majestically around the room.

"Your choice of partner, my lady. Of course," he added blithely, "if you can't decide, the Wheel will be happy to choose for you."

Parvati was not about to leave matters of such consequence to the mob.

"Okay then," she said gamely, "let's see what we have on offer."

A wicked grin tickled her lips as she cast an appraising eye over the boys. For their part, the boys sat up alertly, backs straight, trying hard to

look both impressive and uninterested at the same time. Harry, still fuming about George and Cho, was busy shredding the label of his water bottle when two well-shod feet stopped in front of him.

"Has to be the birthday boy, don't you think?" Parvati said, grinning down at him.

The girls giggled madly. The boys pelted Harry with water bottles — not all of which were empty. Harry shot a glance at Cho; as expected, she didn't look happy. Well, she did it, he thought resentfully. Jeers and laughter sounded when Harry accepted Parvati's outstretched hand. With half an eye on Cho, and not to be outdone by George-sodding-Weasley, Harry pulled Parvati to him and kissed her as he never kissed Cho Chang. Snogging Parvati Patil was scarcely a chore, and their sixty seconds wasn't nearly long enough.

"Lucky bastard," Ron muttered when Harry sat back down.

Harry smiled smugly, but his smile faded when he glimpsed Cho's face. The ever so destructive Wheel kept spinning, indifferent to anything but the strongest cravings in the room.

Whilst Michael Corner and Padma Patil kissed, Ron whispered leeringly in Harry's ear, "So, you and Parvati?"

Harry choked back a laugh.

"Get real," he whispered back.

Ron caught him looking at Cho, who was still hugging her pillow and looking anywhere but at Harry — or George. Saving the best for last, the twins pulled out their new Soothsayer Mints.

"Sixty seconds, ladies and gentlemen," Fred declared, holding up a mint, "pure, unadulterated *truth*! Ask whatever you like, but you only get one question. And let's keep it clean, shall we? Remember, *you* may be the next victim!"

George spun the Wheel and stared at it fixedly. The next victim was Cho Chang. With Veritaserum now in play, her challenge came as no surprise.

"*Truth!*" George cried cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. "Excellent, excellent!"

Cho paled. Harry leaned forward, dead keen to hear some straight answers from her for once. Reluctantly accepting a mint, Cho swallowed and looked around the group anxiously. No one said anything for a moment.

"Do you still fancy Harry?" piped up Ron. Harry glared furiously at his traitorous best mate.

"Yes," Cho admitted, blushing. Harry spirits soared. Good old Ron!

Good old Ron started to ask another question. George brusquely cut him off.

"Only one question, nostril-boy!"

"Do you fancy anyone *else*?" Ginny asked Cho, sneaking a glance towards George.

"Yes," breathed Cho, mortified. Harry's spirits sank somewhere below his feet.

"Who?" George asked at once, his eyes glittering.

Cho seemed strangely relieved by the question and reeled off a long list of names, most of whom were Wizarding rock stars and elite Quidditch players.

"What do you want to do when you leave school?" Katie piped up when Cho looked to be struggling again.

Grateful for the save, Cho described her ambition to become a Healer, itemising each of the many Quidditch injuries she'd had over the years.

While Cho was running down the clock, Harry hissed in Ron's ear, "What d'you do that for? She's gonna think I put you up to it!"

"Thought you'd want to know," Ron whispered back smugly.

Harry pushed him away and clipped him across the back of the head for good measure. Ron just grinned at him, which did nothing to improve Harry's mood. Yes, Cho said she still fancied him, but she fancied lots of blokes by the sound of it! The Wheel of Destruction spun without mercy through several more party guests. Harry was deeply put out when his name appeared once again. Even worse, the Wheel wanted Truth! Groaning deeply, he got up and dragged Fred from the room.

"Hey," complained the redhead fussily, "watch the dragon hide." Out on the landing, he regarded Harry curiously. "It's not like you to be squeamish. What's up?"

"There's stuff people can't know about me," Harry said seriously, "about Voldemort and me. It's just not safe." Fred nodded for him to go on. "Promise me you'll *Silencio* me if I get asked about him. About prophecies — anything like that."

"No problem," Fred said easily.

"Look, I'm serious," Harry said, crossing his arms. "People have died. Promise me!"

"On my honour as a Marauder," Fred said stoutly.

Harry knew he'd never get a better oath than that. Returning to the party, he scanned the room warily; it occurred to him he'd rather be facing Death Eaters. Pull yourself together, Potter, he ordered himself sternly; you're a Gryffindor! Checking Fred had his wand ready, Harry accepted a mint. He felt a familiar dizzy sensation — then nothing. Lavender, freshly reconstituted, was first to pounce.

"How do you *really* feel about Hermione?"

"Adore her," Harry said automatically. "Love her to bits. She's smart and funny and has the biggest heart of anyone I know. She's the only person who's never given up on me. She's stood by me through the darkest times in my life, and that's saying something. She drives me completely nuts, but I don't know where I'd be without her. She —"

"Are you in love with her?" cut in Cho. Harry felt Ron stiffen beside him.

"No," said Harry, feeling both annoyed and relieved to get that out of the way.

"Are you in love with Parvati?" asked Ginny.

Harry's no came so quickly that everyone laughed — well, everyone but Parvati.

"What would make you truly happy in life, Harry?" asked Susan.

Harry was grateful for such a safe question, though one he was forced to consider truthfully. Would killing Voldemort make him happy? Relieved, certainly, but happy?

"Have my parents back." The words just slipped from his lips and the room went rather quiet. "Talk to Sirius again. Stop hearing Mum screaming when —"

Harry broke off; he couldn't finish the sentence; he knew it was a lie. A part of him ached to have any memory of his mother, even a terrible one. The room was completely silent now; no one seemed inclined to ask anything else. Susan looked miserable. Harry reconsidered her question. What would make him truly happy in *this* life? Not in some fantasy or afterlife.

"A family of my own." The words just slipped out. And even though his cheeks pinked at so simple, so ordinary, a dream, Harry knew it was true. "Someone to love. Couple of kids." He couldn't help smiling at the thought of more specky kids with dumb hair being inflicted on the Wizarding World. "Be there for them," he said simply. "Help them grow up."

There was a heartfelt chorus of "awws" from the girls — even Parvati. Harry took a lesson from Cho and racked his brains, trying to think of truthful things that weren't *too* personal before his mind went off on its own again.

"Play Seeker for England," he said, and the boys laughed. Before Harry could stop himself, he blurted, "Get Voldemort out of —"

"Silencio!" Fred cried.

Harry's throat gagged shut. When his time was up, Fred lifted the hex.

"Get Voldemort out of where?" Terry Boot asked eagerly.

Harry cleared his throat.

"My life," he said shortly. He had actually been going to say 'my head', but 'life' seemed to satisfy the group.

The Wheel spun again, and again, with Snogs and Truths that destroyed the composure of many a hapless teen and sent at least three (not all of whom were girls) fleeing the room in fear for their dignity. Then it was Susan's turn to swallow a Soothsayer Mint. She seemed to be holding her own until Ernie asked her which teacher she once had a crush on. Susan blushed deeply and laughed into her hands.

"Lockhart."

The boys laughed; the girls sighed in sympathy.

"Fancy anyone right now?" Justin asked teasingly.

Susan tried hard to say no, but yes came out. She was still blushing and laughing. Harry leapt to the rescue, asking what she wanted to do when she finished school.

"Become an Auror," Susan said with relief. "Practically my whole family's in law enforcement, so it's kind of expected, but it's been ages since they took any new candidates."

As the game progressed, Harry also came to the rescue of Hermione, Ron, and Neville. After the group had to sit through a Neville monologue on the feeding habits of his Mimbulus Mimbletonia, Harry was subjected to second *Silencio* until he could prove he could 'play well with others'.

Only when all its victims had been sufficiently mortified did the Wheel of Destruction voluntarily jump off the wall and roll itself out the door. Where

it went, Harry didn't even want to know.

Lee Jordan quickly had the music box pumping out Weird Sisters' hits. Literally. Half-sized musicians, colourful, ghost-like shades, squeezed out of the music-box's horn and took stage, strutting like the rock stars they were, across the top of the grand piano. The sofas were pushed back and the carpets rolled away to make a dance floor. The girls were quick to start dancing; the boys were quick to hug the walls and watch. Harry was just tilting his head back to take a swig from a bottle of Butterbeer when Lavender whipped it out of his hand. Showing no hard feelings, Parvati grabbed his other arm. Giggling madly, the girls commandeered him for a succession of boisterous hits. Breathless and thirsty, Harry at last broke away from the dance floor and stumbled down to the kitchen for more water. Molly Weasley beamed at him.

"Having fun, dear?" she said. Harry just smiled breathlessly.

"Found another pair, Alastor," Remus told Moody ruefully as he joined them in the kitchen. "That's four so far. I think we're going to have to put an age-line across the airing cupboard."

"Were you ever sixteen, Remus?" chuckled Mad-Eye.

Back inside the drawing room, Ginny and George had their heads together over something or other, and Harry joined Ron in holding up a wall. Whilst Ron glowered impotently at Viktor and Hermione, Harry was busy working up the courage to ask Cho to dance. He'd just left the safety of the wall when George, oblivious to Harry's intentions, beat him to the punch, sweeping up to the Ravenclaw beauty with a winning smile and a dramatic doff of his lime-green top hat. To the birthday boy's mortification, Cho spotted him over George's bent shoulder, and started to smile, but Harry was already backing away, as if remembering something outside that urgently required his attention.

Sitting halfway down the steps, Harry jiggled his knees fitfully. Cho *did* say she fancied him. That was something. But she fancied him before and everything *still* went completely pear-shaped. And now George was all over her. A burst of noise sounded then stopped again. Harry twisted around to see — Cho. She paused indecisively at the top of the stairs. With not a sensible thought in his head, Harry resorted to smiling at her. It seemed to work for she tiptoed down the steps to sit with him.

"So," she whispered, tucking her skirt beneath her, "just how quiet do we have to be out here?"

Harry stared into the girl's face: her dark eyes, her full lips — so achingly close. It couldn't hurt to just kiss her. It *was* his birthday, after all. Just one kiss ...

One kiss became two, two became three, and three became a fourth, which was the one that completely did Harry in. His destruction complete, all the lad could think about was how delicious the girl's lips were, how effortlessly his fingers slipped through her silky hair, how good her caresses felt, how easy it was to wrap his arms all the way round her soft and curvy body.

The sound of Mad-Eye Moody's wooden leg could be heard stumping below them. The teens sheepishly broke apart and scampered back up the stairs.

"You don't want to ..." said Harry, tipping his head towards the drawing room. Cho coyly shook her head.

"Insolent, headstrong boy!" cried Mafalda de Bourgh indignantly. "Just what do you think you're doing with that girl?! In my day —"

"Sorry, sorry!" Harry shot over his shoulder as he and Cho fumbled and giggled their way through the attic's obstacle course of brooding boxes and peeved portraits, the room illuminated by just a few pinpricks of fading sunlight through the roofing tiles. Then, through a slanting door, they stepped straight into Remus's fragrant conservatory.

"Oh, it's so beautiful!" cooed Cho, flitting with delight amongst all the hothouse flowers. "Who's the green thumb?"

"Remus," said Harry. "Whatever you do, don't ask him about his orchids; he'll bend your ear all night."

Harry swung open the doors onto the cooler evening air. Beyond, beckoned a grassy broomstick landing-pad surrounded by a sea of roof gables and chimneys. Above, the twilight summer sun stretched an artist's palette of pinks and yellows and blues across the London sky.

"Don't go past the grass," Harry warned Cho, "or you'll have left the house, and we'll never get you back in again."

Cho skipped outside and threw her arms wide. Laughing and twirling, she tilted back her head to bask in the golden sunset. Harry's breath caught in his throat as he gazed upon her lovely, glowing face.

"It's so beautiful," she breathed, her eyes shining.

Harry managed a nod, unable to tear his eyes away from her lips, aching to kiss them again. After everything that had happened to them, he was still finding it difficult to believe Cho Chang was his, right here, only an arm's length away. Catching her hand as she spun, he pulled her close, their lips met, and he was lost all over again.

The Sun was long gone by the time they returned to the party, and so, Harry was pleased to discover, was George Weasley. He and half the party had moved to the poolroom to play more games, whilst in the drawing room, couples were paired off on the dark dance floor. Finding a quiet spot to watch, Harry folded his arms around Cho's tiny waist and smiled blissfully around the near-empty room, feeling as if all his birthdays had come at once. Twisting around, Cho melted into his arms and the teenagers made excellent use of their ill-lit corner.

After a time, they moved to the glittering dance floor, where Cho yawned happily and snuggled even closer. Harry smiled down at her.

Wonderfully warm and tender feelings swelled up inside of him, more intoxicating than any love potion. In all his life, no one had ever wanted to hold him closely like this. No one — no one at all.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 8 – Green-Eyed Monsters

Harry woke early on Saturday morning with a smile still on his face.

“Morning, folks,” he said, yawning and stretching as he padded into the bathroom to meet the day, but even Mirabella, his overly chatty haddock, was fast asleep, as was the rest of the house.

After dressing in jeans and a Hobgoblins T-shirt, he sat at his desk, flicking through the guitar lesson book Susan Bones’ gave him. His Weird Sisters songbooks were way more interesting, but also way beyond him just yet. Harry peered into Frank’s basket and gave him a tickle; he wasn’t facing *Fretful Favourites* alone — nor in a room without a good Dumber. Frank opened one misty eye then shut it again.

“Ugh, don’t tell me,” he moaned when Harry was obliged to increase his tickle to a poke, “you just *love* the morning.”

“Best part of the day!” Harry proclaimed.

“A gentleman is never at home to callers before eleven,” Frank declared sternly. A new thought seem to strike him. “You know, a little fish for elevenses would be nice.”

“Right …” said Harry. “I just thought you might like to join me downstairs for some music practice, but if you’d rather sleep —”

“Music?” said Frank. “Well, why didn’t you say so, dear boy.” And with that, Frank slithered up and around Harry’s neck.

“You quite comfortable there?” Harry said. Frank wriggled a little.

“Yes, thank you. Well, get along then,” he commanded.

Down in the drawing room, free of his basket, Frank peered around curiously.

“This is nice,” he said approvingly. Harry dumped him atop the piano. “A pillow would be lovely,” sniffed Frank. “Oh no, don’t get up,” he said after Harry already rose and grabbed a pillow from the sofa.

The first ancient ditty in *Fretful Favourites* was the medieval ballad *Greensleeves*, which Harry considered diabolically dull, but it was the only song he knew, and it only needed four chords. Following the instructions carefully, it wasn’t long before he could play it tolerably well.

“Wanna hear it?” he gamely asked Frank.

“You’re going to sing?” Frank said dryly, drawing closer. “This should be interesting.”

Harry slipped outside to check the room’s Dumber was on the strongest possible setting. Back at the piano seat, he steeled himself for battle.

“*Alas, my love, you do me wrong …*” he sang.

After he’d mangled his way through a few verses, he turned to Frank, curious for his first review. Frank was strangely silent. He retracted his head from between James and Sirius and let it flop dramatically against the pillow, making the tassels shake.

“Well, if you *must* sing in English,” he started, sounding very miffed, “I suppose I’ve heard worse.”

Harry gave a short laugh. “Sorry about that. Sometimes I forget which language I’m using.”

Frank considered this.

“Well …” he began slowly, reaching his head around Lily, who peered back at his huge snakehead curiously, “you may find thinking about *me* might help …” Frank paused a moment then confided, “I’m very inspirational, you know.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, chuckling, “but I think I’d better stick with English.”

“Oh well,” said Frank, sighing deeply, “if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly, I suppose. But I shan’t quibble.”

A knock sounded on the drawing-room door. Harry started to call out for the person to enter then remembered the Dumber was on. Padding to the door, he found Susan in a dark-green DA bathrobe and a pair of feathery phoenix slippers. Her long hair was out of its usual plait and tumbled in loose waves down her back.

“Morning!” she said brightly. “Professor Moody said you were practicing. Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” Harry said, standing aside.

Susan stopped when she saw Frank coiled on his pillow. “Er, Harry?”

“Ah, sorry, sorry,” Harry said, dashing forward. “He won’t hurt you, but I can put him away, if you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Susan said, tilting her head at the python, “he looks pretty comfortable where he is.”

Frank lifted his head and gave Susan a bit of a grin, which she returned.

“Susan Bones,” Harry said, “meet Frank!”

The python stretched his jaws impressively, and shook his head, clearly just showing off. Susan ran an inquisitive finger under his flexible jaw.

“Hello, Frank. And how are you this glorious morning?”

“Good morning, you darling creature!” he replied, bowing deeply to the girl. “I find myself extremely well, thank you so very much for asking. And you?”

Susan stared curiously at the weaving, softly hissing snake. When Harry said nothing, Frank hissed at him and tossed his head back towards the girl.

“Frank says hi,” Harry said in English. Frank bared his jaws at Harry, but this only made Harry laugh. “Give it a rest, Frank, I’m not repeating all that.”

But this only made Susan more curious, and Harry was obliged to translate the whole message.

“He really said all that?” she cooed gleefully.

“Yep.”

“Wow,” she breathed. She bowed respectfully to the python and said very properly, “I find myself in the very best of health, thank you, Frank.”

Frank’s tail positively quivered with delight.

“I like this one,” he whispered to Harry, as if confiding a great secret.

“How’s it going?” Susan said to Harry with a nod to *Fretful Favourites*. “What are you up to?”

“*Greensleeves*,” Harry replied, pulling a face. Susan folded her own green sleeves over the edge of the piano and grinned mischievously.

“Go on then,” she said. “Sing it for me.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Harry said very seriously.

“Oh, come on. I’m sure you sound fine.”

“In the shower, maybe,” said Harry ruefully.

“Ah, so it’s a fluidity thing,” Susan said, nodding wisely. “I could get a bucket of water and pour it over you if that’d help.”

Frank snickered appreciatively.

“It’s not nice to make fun of the musically challenged,” Harry said archly.

Susan donned a contrite expression, but her eyes were dancing. Harry admitted he’d never sung for anyone before (Frank hissed rather indignantly at that).

“Well,” Susan said musingly, “you can listen to other people, and it’s enjoyable, but it doesn’t feel the same as doing it yourself. How does it feel when you sing?” Harry confessed it felt good. “So ...” Susan said in a most unreasonably reasonable way, “are you planning on singing in the shower forever?”

Harry’s eyes found the ceiling. “But it’s *Greensleeves*! It has got to be the most *pathetic* song ever written in the history of the English language!”

“Do another one, then.”

“It’s the only one I know!”

Susan’s lips were twitching. Leaning lower against the side of the piano, she rested her chin on her folded arms, waiting. Harry rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” he said irritably, “but no laughing!”

Frank snickered.

“That means you, too!” Harry hissed at Frank.

“Oh, don’t mind little old me,” Frank said silkily. He dangled his head coyly over the edge of the piano and gave his tail a little flick.

Harry started playing and singing but stopped halfway through to grumble, “Seriously, who says ‘wouldst’?”

"Keep going," Susan said serenely. "But slower."

Harry groaned heavily and resumed singing.

"*Greensleeves was all my joy, Greensleeves was my delight, Greensleeves was —*"

"Okay, okay, you can stop!" Susan said, waving her hands and laughing in response to a particularly tortured expression on Harry's face.

"Rubbish, isn't it," he said flatly.

"No, no, no," said Susan. "A few chord changes were scratchy, but it definitely wasn't rubbish. Your voice isn't too bad, actually." Harry bashfully mumbled a thank you. Susan plucked *Fretful Favourites* from the sheet rest and said, "Let's see if we can't find you something a bit chirpier. How about *A Maiden Did Bathing Go*? Erm ... hang on, no, I can't see you singing 'each fish did wish himself a man'. *Loch Lomond* might be good. You probably know it." Harry shook his head. "Sure you do," said Susan, and she sang a line. "Oh, you'll take the high road and I'll take the low road ...". No? Okay, still looking. I think we can skip *Charlotte the Harlot*." Susan chuckled at the look of renewed interest on Harry's face. "I'm afraid Charlotte's a bit out of your league just yet, old son. Come on, we'll give *Greensleeves* another try."

She walked around the piano and sat next to Harry on the wide black bench.

"We?" said Harry, surprised. "You'll sing it with me?"

"That's what we usually means," Susan said. "Unless you'd rather fly solo."

"No, no," Harry said. "I like we. We is good. We is excellent!"

With Susan to sing along with him, and keep him in time, the song didn't seem *quite* so unforgivably moronic, and Harry managed to play it all the way through without a single error.

"Excellent!" Susan said happily. "That was so much better."

"Thanks to you," said Harry, shaking his head.

"You were the one playing," Susan noted.

"No, the boy's right," Frank assured her. "It was you."

Whilst Harry sneaked a look through *Fretful Favourites* for *Charlotte the Harlot*, Susan's gaze drifted towards the photographs atop the piano.

"Is this your family?" she asked interestedly. Harry nodded to a photograph of a man in his early twenties.

"That's my dad, James."

"I suppose everyone says you look alike," Susan remarked.

Harry suppressed a sigh. "Yep."

"They say it like they're telling you something you want to hear," Susan observed with just a trace of bitterness. Then she gave him a sad half-smile. "My cousin Lydia," she explained, "I never knew her, but my Auntie Amelia is always going on and on about how much I resemble her." Susan picked up the eleven-year-old Lily. "And who's this?"

"My mum," Harry said. "When she was little, obviously. Her name's Lily."

"She's beautiful," Susan said. She chuckled when Lily winked at her and did a little curtsy. "All right, I'll say it: you *do* have her eyes."

Harry conceded a crooked smile. "I don't mind that. I just wish I had her eyesight."

Susan exchanged Lily for of photo of a second handsome young man. Sirius gave Susan a rakish wink. Susan smiled back at him then squinted in thought.

"He looks familiar," she said. Sirius affected a nonchalant air, clearly pleased by the attention.

"Sirius," Harry said quietly, "Sirius Black." Susan sucked in a breath, but no revulsion graced her face for the convicted mass murderer. "That was taken before my parents died, before he went to prison. He didn't do it. He didn't do any of it."

"I know," Susan said. "My auntie told me what happened at the Ministry. How you tried to save him. She said you knew him — after he escaped from Azkaban — after all those years with the Dementors ... and the Death Eaters." Susan shook her head sadly at the photograph.

"He was my godfather," Harry volunteered. "He hid out in a cave near Hogwarts — to be close to me. I'd take him food. Then he hid here — I'd visit him in the holidays. This was his house before he ..." Harry's voice drifted off; he didn't know why he was telling Susan all this.

"... Before the Death Eaters killed him," Susan finished for him. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I can't even imagine what he went through: so many years all alone."

Harry nodded slightly; he had not forgotten the toll the Dark Order had taken on Susan's family.

Susan set the framed photo carefully on the sheet rest. Then she started to play — low, lonely notes Harry felt he recognised, yet was sure he'd never heard before. Gripping his guitar tightly lest he twang something, he watched and listened as the girl played for the handsome young man with the dancing eyes, imprisoned now in silver and glass.

Time slowed to nothing. Harry was mesmerised by the way Susan's fingers travelled the keyboard so assuredly, sometimes aggressive, sometimes soft, rhythmically pressing life into the cold keys, conjuring sounds that didn't know they ached to be heard. Long before Harry was ready for the music to stop, it did. As Susan withdrew her hands, the final notes lingered upon the air, filling a deep silence and a stillness defied only by morning sunlight spilling across the glossy black piano.

"Resta Qui," Susan murmured into the silence. "Stay here — with me ..."

Chimes sounded. The spell broken, Harry stared at the grandfather clock in bewilderment. He never heard it so much as dong before, but at least it wasn't shooting arrows at them.

"It's not eleven already, is it?" said Susan.

Harry checked his watch. It wasn't even ten. Bemused, he opened up the grandfather clock and set it to the proper time.

"Still, pretty late," he said apologetically to Susan. "You must be starving."

Susan smiled sheepishly. "I am a bit."

"I make a *great* omelette," offered Harry.

"You're on," said Susan.

Frank, who hadn't taken his eyes off Susan since she started singing, suddenly began to croon:

Have you met Miss Bones

Someone said as we shook hands.

She was just 'Miss Bones' to me ...

Harry dearly wanted to laugh; the python was clearly in love. Frank continued singing merrily to the girl from Harry's neck as they all headed for the kitchen. Glancing at his moodband, Harry spied a sparkling emerald green.

...

And all at once I lost my breath

And all at once was scared to death

And all at once I owned the earth and sky

And now I've met Miss Bones

And we'll keep on meeting till we die

Miss Bones and I.

Harry and Susan weren't the only latecomers to breakfast. Guests milled about in their colourful pyjamas, grazing on anything anyone put out. Mr and Mrs Weasley had just left in search of more supplies for the teen locusts. There was no sign of Cho yet, nor George. After a few discreet inquiries, Harry discovered the twins had left at dawn for Diagon Alley; Saturday and Sunday were their busiest days.

True to his word, Harry whipped up a tasty mushroom omelette for Susan and another for himself. Sitting down between her and Hannah to eat, he felt fingers running through his hair, pulling it this way and that. Lifting his eyes, he found Lavender staring down at him as if he was her next Herbology experiment.

"I'll give you your haircut this morning," she decided.

"I'm right, thanks," Harry said firmly. He knew he could use a cut, but he wasn't inclined to be transfigured into Lavender's pet poodle.

"Oh, go on, Harry," begged Hannah. "Lavender's really good!"

Harry snorted a laugh. "Is this some kind of attempt to get me to use Geoffrey's gunk?"

"It's not gunk," she said earnestly. "Oh, come on, you looked so handsome! And it's free!"

"Someone giving free haircuts?" piped up Oliver; his hearing really was exceptional sometimes.

Lavender played her trump. "I do Justin's! Tell him, Susan!"

"It's true," Susan said fairly. "Lavender does a wonderful job."

Harry glanced down the table towards Justin Finch-Fletchley, whose artfully floppy chestnut curls were well known for inspiring a great deal of insipid swooning amongst Hogwarts' girls.

"It'll just grow back the same," he told Lavender. Lavender patted his cheek.

"Of course, it will," she said comfortingly. Harry shrugged his consent and Lavender started fussing with his hair again. "Oh, I've been wanting to do you for years!" she declared. There was general laughter at this and Lavender blushed.

"Okay," Harry chuckled, pulling a hair from his omelette, "but not at the breakfast table."

The minute he was finished eating, Lavender dragged him to his bathroom, where she cut his hair under the watchful eyes of Mirabella, Hannah, and Frank. The girls weren't gone long when Colin Creevey knocked on Harry's door. He had a thick stack of party photos he'd taken the liberty of developing from Harry's new Snapparazzi 630.

"I tried not to look, honest," the boy whispered nervously before fleeing.

Relaxing on his bed with Frank, Harry glanced through the photos, curious to see what his surrogate eye decided he 'wanted to know'. He was dead pleased with himself when he spotted a photo of Cho taking a sleepy bubble-bath that morning. Ever so patiently, he tried to shake the bubbles out of the way, but Cho kept waking up, scowling at him and preserving her modesty.

"You have been busy, haven't you?" Frank snickered. "You know," he observed, sliding down and around Harry's shoulders for a better look, "I can see why they wear clothes — they're very lumpy."

Harry snorted a laugh. The *if-anyone-sees-these-I'm-dead* pile steadily grew to over a dozen shots, mostly of Cho, but Harry apparently had his eye on other girls, too. There was a most interesting shot of Susan undressing, but, vexedly, her back was to the camera, and no amount of tickling, blowing, or promises of being framed would convince her to turn around.

Harry knew he was going to be saving Voldemort a lot of trouble if the girls ever found the photos, and in the back of his mind a tiny, insistent voice (which sounded a lot like Hermione) urged him to destroy them, but he just couldn't do it. Frank was just as curious about all Harry's 'young ladies', and slithered across the bed, using his tongue to flick the photos over.

"Hey! Stop that," said Harry, tossing him onto his pillows.

Grinning, Frank sneaked closer again but kept his tongue to himself. Until, that is, he saw a photo of Harry kissing Cho under a crimson sunset.

"What happened to Susan?" he hissed indignantly. "I liked her!"

Harry laughed and tried to distract Frank with talk of food.

"Are you hungry yet?" he asked; the python had barely nibbled at the chicken mince Harry left him.

"Thank you, no," said Frank, resting his wedge-shaped head affectionately on the boy's knee, "but I really *should* think about my breakfast order, shouldn't I?"

Whilst Frank expounded upon the many ways one might prepare tuna, Harry smiled at a shot of Cho twirling blissfully on the rooftop. But then he turned over one from the Wheel of Destruction that blackened his moodstone and set his blood boiling. Knowing George and Cho kissed before he and Cho got back together offered no comfort whatsoever. Frank poured himself into Harry's lap and slid his head up the boy's heaving chest for a better look.

"That Cho certainly gets around," he observed serenely.

Harry's moodstone couldn't stay black long. Not when he was getting a training session from *the* Viktor Krum. The Seekers had been out on the pitch for several hours, fine-tuning Harry's different body positions and discussing defensive strategies against Bludgers.

"Every team," Viktor sighed, "say: 'take out Seeker'. You have to be eyes in back of head — all times."

He cast a casual glance over his shoulder to Ron Weasley, who was trying to listen in without showing he was trying to listen in. Harry eagerly lapped up the star Seeker's tips. And it wasn't just what Viktor said, but also from being able to watch him up close, surreptitiously noting little things like how he banked to the left when reaching for the Snitch.

Back in the poolroom bar, people were eating sandwiches and drinking Butterbeers. Hannah and Ernie were busy sorting through a huge stack of Chocolate Frog Trading Cards on the pool table, and Justin and Susan were deep in conversation about something or other. Maybe he was who she liked, mused Harry, remembering Susan said she fancied someone during her truth session. Looking at her animated face, Harry was surprised to find himself a little jealous of the Hufflepuff boy. He shook off the silly notion and turned his attention to the Quidditch friendly Angelina was organising. All the girls wanted to play with Viktor, so Angelina decided on a girls' team led by Viktor and a boys' team led by Harry. She

automatically listed Harry and Viktor as opposing Seekers, but the birthday boy had other ideas, and he found a most enthusiastic ally in his Bulgarian guest.

"*Hermione!*" Ron cried, when he saw the team lists. "Is this a joke?"

"No joke," Harry said brightly. With Viktor fussing over Hermione, Cho would be able to play Seeker. "Which reminds me — *Katie!*"

Harry arranged for Hermione to borrow Katie Bell's kit and broomstick. As he and Viktor helped her buckle up, Harry winced inwardly, wishing he had a helmet for her as well. Only half-joking, he suggested a Sticking Charm to Viktor.

"What?" Hermione squeaked in alarm.

"Bad for manoeuvring," Viktor said, also starting to look a little worried. "I think I get my vand," he decided.

Ron waited for Viktor to leave then stormed over. "What do you think you're *doing*, Hermione? It's not a *game* you know!"

Hermione raised one eyebrow. "Oh, *really*, Ronald, enlighten me."

"You're *terrible* at flying! You'll get yourself killed! You should stick to your books, let someone *else* play!"

"It's really none of your business *what* I do, Ron," said Hermione icily.

"Right," nodded Ron, his ears crimson and his eyes bulging. "Right," he repeated, still nodding, "well, if you want to make a complete *idiot* of yourself!"

Hermione glared in open-mouthed fury at Ron, her clenched fists shaking. Harry yanked Ron away to their changing room before he could do any more damage — and before Hermione could engage her tongue. The fiery redhead strode around the room, kicking at the wooden benches. Bruce buzzed nervously around his head.

"She'll be fine," Harry assured him. "I'll talk to the boys — it's just a friendly."

"And accidents never happen," Ron said, nodding, pacing fitfully around the room. "*You know she can't duck!*"

Harry grabbed Ron by the shoulders.

"Ron. *Ron!* Listen to me for a minute," he said sternly. "I know you don't want to hear this, but Viktor's not going to let Hermione out of his sight. Whatever you might think of him, you *know* he's not going to let anything hurt her."

Ron's only response was a glare. Harry chose to take this as a good sign. He steeled himself for what he felt he had to say.

"You've got to let Hermione make her own choices." Harry looked hard into his best friend's blue eyes. "You can't force her to do what you want, and if you try, you'll lose her."

Ron's fierce face crumpled and he slumped onto one of the benches. Bruce landed on his right hand and crawled across his fingers.

"Look," Harry said, trying to get back on an even keel, "I'll talk to the lads. No one's gonna kill anyone."

Back in the bar, Harry decided he wasn't so sure about that when he spotted George Weasley, returned from work, standing over Cho, who was looking toned and gorgeous in jeans and a white tank-top. George, draped in black referee-robies, leaned closer to whisper something in her ear then slid his hands up and down her bare arms in just a completely unnecessary way. Laughing nervously, Cho pulled away from him. Righteous rage inflated Harry's chest. Didn't George realise Cho was taken?! Surely, the git wasn't that thick! Okay, maybe he was that thick, but that was hardly Harry's problem. Shoving an armful of orange robes at Dean, he strode across the room.

"Allow me," he said frostily, yanking Cho's wrist guard from George's hand. "Don't you have some balls you need to get sorted, George?"

Looking relieved, Cho held out her wrist to Harry. George's eyes narrowed dangerously at his fellow Gryffindor, but whatever was about to roll off his tongue was bitten back when his mother came bustling over with purple robes for the girls.

"Oh, that's much better, dear," Mrs Weasley said approvingly of Harry's haircut. "George, hand these out, there's a good boy."

George accepted the chore, but the look he gave the birthday boy was anything but friendly. Victorious, Harry slid a hand around Cho's shoulders and smiled smugly down at her.

"Nice," she said appraisingly of his haircut, "but I kind of liked it all messy — like you've just tumbled out of bed, just *begging* to have someone's fingers running through it."

Harry could have kissed her for that. Then he realised he could, so he did. And he made sure George got a good eyeful!

"Don't worry," he said cheerily, "I'll grow it back, especially for you!"

Cho smiled dreamily back at him and reached a hand up through his short hair and down his bare neck, setting his skin tingling and his mind thinking of anything but Quidditch.

"HARRY'S HORNTAILS V VIKTOR'S KRUMPETS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" roared Lee through the charmed megaphone. "AND THEY'RE OFF!"

Dipping and diving, Ginny eluded all Beaters and Bludgers to score an easy first goal.

"Wake up, Ron!" yelled Harry. He didn't really care that Ginny scored, more that Ron's attention was fixated on Viktor and Hermione.

Lee egged the crowd on, cheerily calling out, "And let's hear a round of Weasley is our king!"

Zacharias Smith zigzagged through the girls and made a good attempt on goals, but Padma deftly deflected the Quaffle. Ginny retrieved the ball and gently tossed it to Hermione.

"Granger takes the Quaffle," Lee called. "Somewhat unorthodox flying style, but seems to work for her. Her way seems clear — she shoots ... OOH, she misses! Never mind. Where's Lavender got to?"

Ron tossed the Quaffle to George and returned, brooding, to his goals.

"Oh, there you are Lavender ... anyone got nail clippers?" said Lee. "Where were we? Ah, Corner ducks a Bludger from Krum ... passes to Smith ... back to Corner ... to Smith ... Horntails take another shot. Padma blocks it! Not bad this girl: beauty, brains, definitely a Keeper."

Hermione regained the Quaffle and hurtled erratically down the pitch. Viktor flew beneath her, anxious as a mother hen, but Harry's Horntails were far too star struck to do anything but watch as the Bulgarian superstar swept past them. When Hermione neared the goals, Viktor batted a Bludger towards the opposing Keeper. Ron ducked the Bludger, but Bruce was not so fortunate.

"Bruce?" whimpered Ron, watching helplessly as his blowfly plummeted. "RIGHT!" he declared fiercely. Zooming past a startled Hermione, he abandoned his goals and swept past Dean, growling, "I NEED THIS!" He wrenched the Beater's bat from Dean's hand and was off.

Harry didn't have to guess who Ron was determined to bludgeon. Hermione, although confused by the unguarded goals, kept going and stopped to take a dainty netball shot into the centre ring.

"GRANGER SCORES!" roared Lee.

The look on Hermione's face was priceless to Harry. And as he cheered her goal, he couldn't help but be glad Ron buggered off for a bit. Ever practical, though, he sent Dean to guard the goals. He doubted Ron would be back any time soon.

Lee spotted the changes. "Weasley's moved to Beater and takes a mighty swipe at Krum. Krum deflects and pursues Granger. But — yes — not before sending a second Bludger to Weasley. Seems to be a bit of a contest going on there!"

As the game progressed, Lee maintained a jovial commentary, making sure to say something complimentary about each girl, and Harry found it increasingly difficult to ignore Ron and Viktor trying to wipe each other out. The battle was getting ugly, and Harry could see Viktor's patience was rapidly running out. For Hermione's part, she ignored them all and zoomed around in an increasingly casual manner. Harry called Anthony Goldstein over and pleaded for him to keep an eye on her then he flew down to Ron.

"Ron — mate ..." started Harry, close enough now to need to duck the Bludgers flying back and forth, "... c'mon, you don't need to wipe Viktor out."

Ron spun around, his eyes bulging. "HE KILLED HIM!"

"What are you going on about?" Harry asked, bewildered. "Killed who?"

"BRUCE!" roared Ron. Then, rising before their very eyes, soared a battered green blowfly. "Bruce!" breathed Ron.

Bruce had clearly taken a beating, and one of his wings looked a bit crooked, but he buzzed around enthusiastically nonetheless. Ron eyed the fly affectionately before pointing his bat to Viktor and saying, "Sick 'em, Bruce!"

Bruce enthusiastically zoomed off. Bemused, Harry watched as Viktor tried to hold onto his broomstick, beat off Bludgers, and get Bruce out of his face. Before Harry could warn him, Viktor whipped out his wand and tried to Vanish Bruce. A swarm of angry blowflies erupted from thin air and attacked him. Laughing hysterically, Ron rolled over and over on his Cleansweep.

"Call them off, Ron!" Harry yelled, appalled, but Ron was too far gone to listen.

"Onya, Bruce!" he cried appreciatively.

Lee finally noticed what was going on. "What's up with Viktor? ... Some kind of black cloud ... OHO — AND GINNY SCORES! Krumpets lead by thirty! Come on, lads! It's the noble sport of warlocks, remember!"

Referee George flew by only to gleefully raise a fist and bellow, "THE HIVE LIVES!"

Harry spun around angrily. "Get back here! Get rid of those flies! NOW!"

But George wasn't listening; he swore at something beyond Harry and zoomed straight past him.

"HERMIONE! SOMEONE GRAB HER!!" screamed Lee. "GOLDSTEIN!! YOU LITTLE RIPPER!! ... WICKED CATCH!"

Harry was already hurtling at breakneck speed towards Hermione when Anthony caught her and deposited her safely on the ground. Seeing she was safe, George arced around to return to the game. Harry kept going. Stumbling off his Firebolt, he wrapped Hermione in a bone-crushing hug.

"Are you okay?" he begged breathlessly.

Laughing, Hermione wriggled free of Harry's arms and said, "Well, I will be if you don't crush me to death!" She turned to Anthony, her eyes shining, and said, "That was *brilliant*!" She gave him a swift kiss on the cheek, re-mounted her broom, and zoomed skywards again.

Harry gaped as Hermione flew away, lurching from side to side.

"She really *is* a Gryffindor!" Anthony exclaimed admiringly before chasing after her.

"Hey, what's Oliver doing out there?" called Lee.

Harry mounted his broom and sped back towards Ron and Viktor. Oliver had banished the Bludgers and was regarding Viktor's black cloud with dismay. Bruce's friends now numbered in the tens of thousands. Fred flew in and issued the correct counter-charm and the cloud vanished. Ron wisely backed away, alarmed at the expression on Viktor's face. Harry flew to a halt between the pair, holding a hand up to each side. He was utterly fed up with *both* of them.

"Back off Viktor! And you can just wipe that smile off your face, Weasley!"

"He cast the spell!" complained Ron.

"Just shut your trap!" Harry yelled. "Trying to *bludgeon* him to death! What's he ever done to *you*? This was *supposed* to be a *friendly*!"

Viktor grunted his agreement, but Harry turned on him as well.

"And *you*!" he roared. "Did you even *notice* Hermione fell off her broom? You *promised* me you'd take care of her!"

Both Viktor and Ron paled and scanned the pitch for Hermione. Other than Bludgers, falls from brooms were a player's worst fear; gravity had a way of beating wands hands down.

"Anthony caught her!" Harry declared scathingly. "She's fine, as if either of *you* two care! *Neither* of you deserve her! This stops, *right here, right now*!"

Shamefaced, Ron and Viktor mumbled their apologies to Harry.

"And people wonder why You-Know-Who's on the run," Fred observed dryly.

Harry tried not to laugh. Drifting backwards, he motioned to the troublesome pair to come together.

"Now shake hands," he ordered them.

The players advanced cautiously and exchanged the briefest of handshakes. A lone blowfly flew onto Ron's shoulder.

"You," Harry ordered, pointing at Ron, "get back to goals! And *you*," Harry turned to Viktor, a reluctant grin sneaking onto his lips, "get back in the game. And *neither* of you goes anywhere *near* Hermione!"

Viktor and Ron slunk off obediently.

Without Bludgers, the game was more carefree for both sides. Harry's attention turned back to Cho and the Golden Snitch. Smiling at each other from a distance, they circled the pitch at speed in ever-decreasing arcs. The Snitch suddenly appeared between them. Charging, the Seekers collided, the fluttering Snitch trapped between their bodies.

Cho giggled hysterically. "Oh, that *tickles*!"

Harry continued grabbing for anything that wasn't the Snitch. Brooms and bodies tumbled over each other as the pair spiralled downwards.

"OH NO!" cried Lee. "CHANG AND POTTER ARE IN DISTRESS! ... Ah, no, hang on, maybe not ..."

As the ground rushed towards them, Harry pulled up short and they tumbled off their brooms, coming to rest with Harry flat on his back and Cho kneeling astride his stomach, her fist raised in triumph.

"CHANG HAS THE SNITCH!!" bellowed Lee. "KRUMPETS WIN!"

His chest heaving, Harry grinned up at Cho's beaming face. Reaching up with both hands, he grabbed her robes and pulled her down for a laughing, sweaty kiss. Cho, one hand still raised in triumph, kissed him back with great enthusiasm.

"Potter seems to be, um, congratulating Chang," noted Lee. "Rather a lot by the look of it. Can someone separate those two? ... OOOH! ... Now, that's just not Quidditch! Clearly a personal foul!"

Harry's legs jerked uncontrollably, bucking Cho right off him.

"That's the way," George said, smirking, "I'd hate to have to hex you, too, Cho."

Floating above them, George toyed with his victim for a wee while before lifting his Tickling Charm and shepherding the pair towards their broomsticks.

"I think we can take it from here, George," Harry said, scowling, still shaking off the hex.

"All part of the service," he declared, smiling benignly.

"Bugger off, George," Cho said sweetly.

"You wound me, Miss Chang!" George cried, slapping a hand melodramatically to his heart and shaking his head sorrowfully as he flew away.

Harry looked up at the Krumpets, flying high above them, still circling and cheering each other.

"Girls look happy," he observed, smiling. "Congratulations."

Harry pulled Cho into his arms and kissed her deeply. Cho wrapped her arms around his neck, but Harry jerked away, laughing and swiping at his ear.

"Oh, sorry," laughed Cho, holding up the fluttering Snitch. "What say we slip away from all this," she purred, leaning close again and waving the Snitch vaguely towards the players now landing on the pool room balcony.

Harry beamed back at her. That was the best idea he'd heard all day! Hand in hand, they flew back to the poolroom balcony, where Viktor's excited Krumpets rushed forward to hug Cho — Harry's Horntails weren't far behind, and so was referee George. Cho eyed him up and down disdainfully.

"Oh, come on," George said winningly, "what's a little hex between friends?"

Harry stared in shock; he couldn't believe his eyes! Cho! She was smiling dreamily at George. Her full lips were parted — she was sliding her arms around his neck — she was going to —

George jumped in alarm as the Golden Snitch fell down the back of his robes. The crowd laughed and cheered to see George writhing and twisting, desperate to escape the Snitch. Cho skipped over to Harry, grabbed his hand, and pulled him from the room. The pair bolted up the stairs, higher and higher until they tumbled, laughing, into Harry's bedroom.

"That was just brilliant!" Harry gushed, pinning her against the closed door.

He would worry about George's revenge later; right now he had much more important things on his mind. Giggling, Cho pushed him away and spun around, pulling him over to the bed where they collapsed in a tangle of robes, arms, and legs.

"Now, where were we," she purred, "before we were so *rude*ly interrupted?"

"Harry, are you in here?" called a man's voice barely minutes later.

Harry and Cho broke apart, startled, as Remus stepped into the room, a pair of Omnioculars in his hands. Cho let out a gasp and Disapparated from beneath the boy. Harry immediately flopped onto the mattress and let out an anguished moan. A small sigh escaped Remus's lips.

"I think we need to have a little chat, Harry," he said, closing the door.

Harry groaned deeply. Stretching a hand across the mattress, he retrieved his glasses before rolling off the bed. Folding his arms across his chest, he glared at Remus's feet and waited mutinously for the lecture to begin.

"I'm not sure how I feel about you having girls in your bedroom, Harry," started Remus.

Harry rolled his eyes; he thought Remus sounded like he knew *exactly* how he felt about him having girls in his bedroom.

"We weren't *doing* anything," he grumbled.

"At least you're wearing protection," Remus joked, eyeing Harry's full Quidditch garb.

Harry regarded Remus's shoes sullenly. A lot of things were running through his mind, but one thought kept recurring: he *really* needed to install that compromising-situation door-bolt!

"Harry, I'm responsible for these girls —" Remus began.

"Cho is overage," Harry cut in curtly; he was not feeling a lot of love for his guardian right now.

"I'm responsible for these girls this weekend," Remus repeated stiffly, "and I don't want to find you and Cho closed up in here like that again." Harry stared hard at the floor, wondering what Cho was thinking right now. "Are you listening to me, Harry?" Remus said sharply.

"Yes, sir," Harry said shortly.

Remus pulled his fingers through his hair.

"Would you do me the courtesy of looking at me when I'm talking to you?" he snapped.

Harry looked up just as Remus's hand whipped back down to his side. Reflexively, he jumped back and felt for the wall, long years of eluding his aunt and uncle, as well as regular beatings from Dudley, triggering an automatic reaction to get out of harm's way. Harry felt his face burning, mortified, but also confused, by his own reaction. He knew Remus would never hit him — didn't he?

An uncomfortable silence hung heavily between them. Harry struggled to think of something to say to fill the horrible void.

"Harry ..." Remus murmured. He stepped closer and tried to reach out to stroke Harry's hair.

Harry fell to one knee and started unbuckling a leg guard. "Do you want a hand with dinner?" he asked.

Remus's hand fell to his side. Several long moments passed before he spoke again.

"Molly's agreed to pizza ..."

Harry just nodded at the floor and switched knees, unbuckling the other guard.

"I know I'm not all human, Harry," Remus began, each word costing him, "but I don't want you to be scared of me."

"What? No!" Harry said, standing to face him. "I'm not afraid of you. *Never* think that!"

Confused for a moment, the colour drained from Remus's face as comprehension dawned. Harry could almost see him putting all the pieces together. The man asked only one question.

"How long?" he said bleakly.

An irrational feeling of shame swept over Harry to be understood so easily.

"I dunno," he muttered, "ever since I can remember."

Fresh horror crossed Remus's face.

"And I nearly sent you back there! No wonder you —" He broke off and spun away, flinging the Omnioculars onto the bed and clenching and unclenching his fists. "Dumbledore wants to send you back to them next year!" he said incredulously, building up steam again. "Well, I won't have it! You are *never* going back there!" he said, jabbing a finger at Harry. "Do you hear me? Never! Your home is here with me! *Right?*"

"Right," Harry said at once; it was all he ever wanted.

"What use is a month of sanctuary a year from now, anyway?" Remus muttered, more to himself than Harry, though Harry heartily agreed. Remus, meanwhile, was still working himself into a lather. "They have to pay!" he growled, pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

Looking at Moony in this state, Harry couldn't help but smile at the glimpse he was getting of the werewolf within.

"What?" Remus said, frowning deeply. "Why are you smiling?"

"Sorry," said Harry, scratching his head. "Look, this is all ancient history to me — water under the bridge and all that. As much as I'd love you to rip into the Muggles, they just aren't worth the grief."

Remus glared at his ward. "You're worth the grief!"

Harry smiled at his feet.

"Stop smiling! This is serious!" insisted Remus, but he was losing steam in the face of his grinning ward. "Tell me what I can do for you!" he pleaded.

"You're already doing it," Harry murmured, feeling doubly fond of his guardian. "It just feels good to have someone on my side."

"Always, Harry," Remus said, his hand reaching out, successful this time in caressing the boy's hair, "always."

Harry's toe found a need to interrogate the rug. It had only just hit him. Remus was real, no longer just a holiday from reality. He was truly home. The thought left him feeling strangely giddy.

"Except when I'm snogging girls in my room?" he prompted cheekily.

Remus snorted a reluctant laugh.

"Right. Girls. I almost forgot." He rubbed his hands over his face and shook his head in defeat. "I am so out of my depth; this is all so new to me."

"What?" teased Harry. "Being a dad?"

"Yes, being a dad," Remus moaned. "I have no idea what I'm doing half the time."

Harry was delighted; Remus always seemed so calm and in control.

"Well, if you want *my* opinion," he said, slapping a hand on the man's shoulder, "Exceeds Expectations!"

"Yeah?" Remus said softly.

"Yeah. But then again," Harry held his up his hands and shrugged, "like I would know one way or the other."

Remus chuckled at that and started again.

"Look," he said, rubbing at his neck, "about Cho in your room, house rules might relax in the future, but please, I'm begging you, not this weekend, okay?"

"Yes, Dad," joked Harry.

Remus smiled down at his feet. An odd feeling of guilt caught Harry off guard. He shook off the feeling; he was being daft — it was just a laugh; he knew who his dad was.

"Viktor's still running his tryouts for tomorrow's game if you want to come down and watch," Remus suggested fondly.

Harry winced. "Ah, yeah ... first, I think I'd better find out where Cho landed."

Remus just rolled his eyes and held a hand towards the door. At the doorway, he slung a confidential arm around Harry's shoulders.

"I wouldn't go near the girls' dorm; I've put a gender line across the door ... oh, and the airing cupboard's probably not a wise idea either."

Harry glared at Remus, who merely toddled off down the hall and practically bounced down the stairs.

"Does this mean we've seen the last of Cho?" hissed a hopeful voice.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder to Frank, who was now dangling from the rafters of his bed.

"You heard all that before — with Remus and me?" he said slowly, closing the door.

Frank stretched his long neck out towards Harry.

"You know," said the serpent, weaving from side to side, "one's handlers are not always kind ... I've had a few rough ones in my day, too."

Frowning, Harry crossed the floor to stroke his python. "I'm sorry to hear that, Frank."

"Your current handler doesn't seem too bad," said Frank. "Has he had you long?"

Harry gave a short laugh and shook his head. "No, not too long ... no."

"Well then," Frank said brightly, "a new beginning for both of us!"

Harry slid his hand affectionately over Frank's smooth scales.

"Yep. But right now, I need to find a girl. Wish me luck!"

"Find a good one!" Frank cried out encouragingly.

Giving the girls' dorm a wide berth, Harry dashed down to the poolroom, saw Cho wasn't there, grabbed the hand of the first girl he could find and dragged her up the stairs. He only got as far as the third-floor landing when he found a stony-faced Cho Chang glaring down at him.

In retrospect, running up the stairs, holding hands with a loudly giggling Parvati Patil, and panting breathlessly, "I need you in the bedroom," might not have been the cleverest of Harry's ideas.

Saturday evening of the Potterfest weekend saw an impromptu band taking stage in the drawing room: Tonks on drums, Bill on guitar, Hestia Jones singing, and Kingsley Shacklebolt both singing and playing the double bass. Susan, Justin, and Ernie were also in the band, playing piano, saxophone, and trumpet respectively. Even Oliver made a contribution, of a sort, on his bagpipes, and there was much cringing at his mournful, but enthusiastic, wheezing. Everyone who could find a partner was on their feet, including Molly and Arthur Weasley, breathlessly jiving to both the chagrin and delight of their numerous offspring. Even Mad-Eye Moody looked as if he was enjoying himself, leaning against the grandfather clock and tapping his wooden leg in time with the music.

"I keep telling you," Harry hissed in exasperation, holed up in a far corner with Cho, half-hidden behind the musty old Black Family Tree, "Parvati doesn't mean a thing to me. Not a thing!"

"What about Natalie?" challenged Cho.

Harry sputtered indignantly, "What's Natalie got to do with anything? Natalie's just my godmother's niece! I was just showing her around the shops! I'll take another truth mint if you don't believe me!"

Cho said nothing to that. She seemed to be weakening, which was lucky because Harry was bluffing about Natalie. He pressed his advantage, tugging Cho out of the noisy room and into the hall and up against a nice solid wall, where his lips found her neck and his breath her ear.

"You're the one, Cho. You're always the one."

That did the trick. At last, she surrendered, melting into his willing arms, fitting into him like a perfectly matched puzzle-piece. Harry's senses were achingly full of her: the scent of her, the taste of her delicious skin — her lips so soft, so yielding ...

"Hem, hem!" sounded an Umbridge-like voice, accompanied by sniggers and laughs. Both Cho and Harry groaned deeply. "Mr Potter and Miss Chang — oh, dear me," Ginny declared in a sickly-sweet voice, "late for class again! I really think I'm going to have to separate you two. A lifetime snogging ban should do the trick, I think."

Dean, Seamus, and Lavender laughingly pushed the hapless couple back into the drawing room, where they joined the rest of teenagers in making cheerfully clumsy attempts at imitating the senior Weasleys. Much more impressive was Remus Lupin. Harry wasn't letting Cho out of his sight, and he and his girl watched on, amused and impressed, as Remus expertly swung a beaming Hestia through Kingsley's rendition of *Have You Met Miss Jones?*

Cho slipped from Harry's grasp long enough to join a gaggle of girls at the drinks table. After taking a moment to check George was nowhere near, Harry headed to the bay-window end of the room, where the air was fresher and Bill and the other musicians were taking a break. Harry discovered they already had a groupie.

"And just how did you manage to get down here?" Harry said in English, playing with Frank's tail.

"It was the lovely Susan's idea," whispered Frank.

"That'd be me," said Susan sheepishly. "I found him slithering around under my cloud bed. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Harry said.

Cho came over with a water bottle and a smile for Harry, but she was about as pleased to see Frank as Frank was to see her. Susan beckoned the python to her and he gladly slithered across the gleaming piano top and disappeared over the edge.

"You-Know-Who has a snake, doesn't he?" Cho said in an odd voice, staring at Frank's vanishing tail. "That's what you said in the article about Cedric. The night he was killed, there was a snake."

Harry's insides went as cold as if he'd been breathed upon by a Dementor. *Cedric*. Bill and Susan exchanged a wary look.

"Frank is nothing like Nagini," Harry said stiffly. "Nagini's a —" Harry broke off as his head filled with the terrible memory of crunching his powerful fangs into Arthur Weasley's ribcage. "Nagini's a monster, a killer. He could swallow a man. Frank is just a snake. My snake," he added firmly.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Cho said, holding up her hands in surrender, as if the boy needed to be humoured, "he's just a snake."

She slid her hand around Harry's waist and cuddled into his body. Harry's hand involuntarily slid around her bare shoulders, her halter-top rendering resistance futile. The band started up again, and Harry sipped at his water, trying to get his head back in the game. Everyone else was having fun, talking and laughing and dancing. Well, not everyone. Harry spotted Ron holding up a wall and staring broodingly into the dance floor. Viktor was on the opposite side of the room doing the same. Between them, Anthony and Hermione were dancing. The two Prefects were accepting earnest instructions from Hannah and, of all people, Neville Longbottom.

"Do you want to learn properly?" Cho asked Harry hopefully.

Harry stared blankly at the girl. She couldn't actually be serious. Cho resignedly blew out her cheeks and stayed with him by the wall, just watching. But then George came over and asked her to dance, citing a severe shortage of girls.

"You don't mind, do you, old son," George said, clapping Harry cheerily on the back.

"Better you than me," Harry said, but he was far from pleased.

Standing against the wall near Bill, Harry's glowering green eyes tracked the pair on the dance floor. Bile rose in his throat when George slid his hand across Cho's bare back. A litany of curses formed behind lips that were pursed impotently. When George pulled Cho into his chest, Harry's plastic bottle burst, spraying water all over Bill's dragon-hide boots and causing the man to take two judicious steps away from the Boy-Who-Blew-Up-His-Auntie.

Muttering an apology to Bill, Harry made a Herculean effort to distance himself from the jealousy stabbing at his chest. It was only George, he kept telling himself. Cho wasn't doing anything to encourage him — was she? Another song started then another and *still* Cho and George kept on dancing. Was Cho *trying* to drive him nuts?

Cracking and un-cracking his broken water bottle, Harry was startled to see his moodstone had not only blackened but was now shooting red sparks. He frowned at the stone. That really couldn't be good.

At last, the band took a break and Cho slipped away from George to return, smiling, to Harry's side; she seemed utterly oblivious to how torn up he was.

"Fred's a good dancer, isn't he," she said happily.

"That was George," Harry said stonily.

Cho's mouth formed a delicate O and she laughed a little. Harry was not amused.

"Oh come on, don't be like that," she said, rolling her eyes.

Harry's arms remained folded; he would be any way he wanted! Fred, indeed!

"Look, I'm spent," Cho said, stretching to kiss his cheek before he could stop her. "I might turn in. Night."

"Nightie night!" Frank called cheerily from the piano top. "Off you go!"

"Shut up, Frank," Harry hissed in Parseltongue.

By the time he turned back to give Cho a good piece of his mind, she was gone. Still seething inside, Harry decided that Cho Chang was slipperier than quicksilver when she didn't want to deal with him! Slumped broodingly against the wall, he noticed Remus sneaking glances his way from across the room. Harry fleetingly considered going to him for advice but just as quickly discounted the idea — the man was practically a monk.

"Cheers," Harry muttered when Bill strolled over to him with fresh water bottle. "Sorry about your boots."

"A splash of water's never going to hurt dragon hide," Bill said easily. He slung an arm casually across Harry's shoulders and lowered his voice so only Harry could hear. "You okay? You seem a bit ..." Bill's voice trailed off leadingly. "You know, if you ever want to talk ..."

Harry was sorely tempted. Bill wasn't that old; he'd understand about girls, and yet Harry didn't fancy the man thinking he couldn't even hang on to one for more than twenty-four hours.

"Maybe some other time," he managed to mumble. "I'm pretty beat."

"Sure," Bill said, giving the boy's shoulder a friendly squeeze before letting him go. "But you know, Harry," he added in a low voice, "you really don't want to bottle things up too much; they have a way of — exploding."

"Yeah," Harry mumbled uneasily. As appealing as the thought was of adding an inflated George to the party decorations, Harry knew he'd be kicked out of school for sure. "Come on, Frank," he said, collecting his python, "time to retire."

"Must I?" Frank protested, trying to squirm off Harry's shoulders.

"Yes," Harry said shortly. He slipped out of the room, keeping a firm hold on his snake.

"Did you get rid of that Cho?" Frank asked hopefully as they headed upstairs to Harry's bedroom.

"None of your business."

"Well, *really*," sniffed Frank. "There's no need to take it out on me if you're still stuck with her! Now, *Susan*, on the other hand —"

"Shut up, Frank!" Harry hissed angrily. "My love life is officially off limits!"

Frank bared his jaws at the boy in annoyance. Harry strode over to his desk, dumped the python in his basket and shoved on the lid. Still churned up, he fitfully pulled off his clothes and paced around the room. Party photos were still strewn face-up across the bed, each one a little movie screen, replaying some mortifying turn of the Wheel of Destruction. Harry's jealous green-eyes found the worst shot. Snatching it up, he glared furiously at George, who was passionately snogging Cho's socks off. Righteous fury rushed to Harry's head to see *his* girl pressed into someone else's body — someone else's lips tasting her skin, her lips, her tongue ...

Harry ripped the wretched photo in half, then quarters, then eighths, but he still couldn't pry their lips apart. Incensed, he hurled them into the fireplace then spun back to the bed. Wrenching off the blankets, he sent the rest of the photos flying. But all that achieved was the papering of his floor with dozens of Rons, Hermiones, Chos, and the rest of his friends, all staring up at him resentfully. Sat slumped upon his messed up bed, Harry dropped his head into his hands and tried hard to clear his mind. Not a chance. Something was writhing in his guts, as if a serpent fighting to escape. It was still twisting him in knots when sleep claimed him.

Cho stood before him, smiling and twirling, her arms wide open, her beautiful face tilted up to a vivid crimson and gold sunset. Harry tried to grab her, but his hand went straight through her body. He felt an icy dread sweep through him, as if she were a ghost. Then she was gone and he was on his broomstick. The sky darkened ominously. Another flier, draped in black, hurtled towards him at speed, screaming his name. It was George, the idiot! He was going to kill them both! Harry tried to dodge out of the way, but suddenly his Firebolt was gone and he was plummeting into an abyss, head over heels. George raced to get underneath him, scrambling to grab him as he passed. Yanked from his fall, Harry looked up gratefully at George then screamed on beholding a black-faced woman grinning down at him, her eyes dripping with blood, her hair a mass of spitting snakes, every single one of them hissing her name.

"MEGAERA!" Harry yelled, struggling to break free.

Victorious, the demon dug her talons deeper and crowed with laughter. She had him now!

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter-9 — Sanctuary Surrendered

"Harry!" called a man, shaking him. "Harry, look at me!"

Sitting bolt upright, Harry whacked someone's head with his own then collapsed into his pillows, shielding his eyes against the too bright light. He could still hear screaming, but it wasn't him. He felt utterly disoriented. He blinked upwards and found Remus's blurry face.

"Who — who's screaming?" he rasped.

"It's just Mrs Black. You were having a nightmare."

Cold with sweat, Harry knew it was no ordinary nightmare — that demon looked horribly familiar. Figures were silhouetted in his doorway, and one electric-blue eye.

"Just hold still," Remus murmured. He sent the guests away, reassuring them Harry was fine. Closing the door, he returned to Harry and felt his forehead. "Can you tell me what happened? Did you have a vision? Is it Voldemort? Are you in pain?"

Harry was barely listening. His earlier demons were all versions of himself, but this one was black — not to mention female — and this time *he* was the victim. Harry's mortification escalated; was all this fuss just because he was jealous of George and Cho? He was just so sick and tired of his subconscious messing with his head.

"What? Sorry — not a vision, just a dream," he said, feeling foolish. "Sorry I woke everyone up. What time is it?"

"Bit after one. I don't think too many people were asleep yet," Remus said, though Harry didn't find that particularly reassuring. Had the girls heard him screaming? Had Cho?

Remus looked just as worried, though possibly not for the same reasons as Harry. He left to fetch a sleeping draught, and Harry felt a fresh dose of terror when he realised that the photos of the girls getting undressed were strewn all over the floor! Had Remus seen them? Harry leapt out of bed, scrambling to pick them up and shove them under the sheets before Remus came back. He only just made it. Accepting the potion, he drank it down in one long swig. The last thing he saw as sleep claimed him was his guardian's anxious face.

Next morning, Harry blearily opened his eyes then groaned and shut them again against the morning light. Rolling onto his back, he stretched out under the covers, trying fruitlessly to fall back to sleep, then tensed; someone was in the room.

"Remus?" mumbled Harry. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and swallowed down a stale taste in his mouth.

"Morning," said Remus, rising from his wingchair. He offered Harry a slight smile and a hot cup of tea. "I can't believe how fast your hair has grown back."

Harry felt his hair; it grew quick, but not usually *this* quick, then he remembered all the fuss he'd caused the night before. Sitting up he realised there were photos stuck to his legs under the sheets. He really didn't want to know who was looking at what down there. Reaching for his glasses, he assembled his best innocent expression and meekly accepted his tea. Remus sat quietly on the edge of the bed — for a little while — before asking about his nightmare.

"You cried out a name ..." he said leadingly.

"We really need to stick a Dumber on my room," muttered Harry.

"Does Megaera ring any bells?" prompted Remus. "A friend of yours?"

"No," Harry said quickly. "I mean I dunno — sometimes I just get bad dreams."

"Megaera's the name of an ancient and unforgiving justice demon," Remus offered helpfully; he'd clearly been thinking about this all night. "Maybe you read about her some place?"

"Yeah, maybe," Harry conceded. He didn't think so, but he'd seen a lot of weird things in the library, looking for answers about death.

"Megaera is known as The Jealous Fury," Remus continued thoughtfully. "According to the myth, she and her sisters are inspired by righteous fury to punish wrongdoers."

Heat flushed Harry's cheeks; he had a fair idea what inspired his latest demon.

"Do you mind if we talk about something else?" he mumbled.

"I was chatting with Anthony and Hermione last night," Remus remarked casually. "They said something about preparatory NEWT essays needing to be done over the summer. Perhaps we could talk about that?"

Harry's lips twisted into a crooked smile, and he kicked at Remus from under the blankets that had somehow found their way back onto his bed.

"It's just — last night I was feeling a bit — I was kind of upset, and I didn't clear my head, and it just sort of spilled over into my dreams. It's nothing — it's stupid. I don't want to bother you with this stuff."

Remus set down his coffee cup. "Bother me," he insisted earnestly. "That's what I'm here for. You're not alone, Harry."

Harry felt his face grow even warmer. "I know — it's just — I mean it's kind of personal ..."

"Oh," said Remus, pulling back, abashed, "right." He pulled back and was silent a moment. "Do you think you could talk to Bill?"

"Sure," Harry said blankly — anything to get off the topic.

Remus nodded with relief and allowed the conversation to shift towards small-talk about the party.

"So, you and Hestia ...?" Harry said leadingly.

Remus's eyes narrowed. "What about me and Hestia?"

"Don't you glare at *me*," Harry said, smirking, "I saw you two on the dance floor — very cosy."

"Time to meet the day, I think," Remus decided.

Harry grinned up at his guardian, knowing he'd touched a nerve. "Why don't you go back to bed? I can get breakfast sorted."

Remus regarded him appraisingly. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I'm perfectly fine!" Harry said indignantly, waving him away. "Quit fussing and go back to bed!"

After dressing in jeans and a green, rune-decorated T-shirt, Harry refilled Hedwig's water then peered inside his python's basket.

"Morning, Frank," he offered tentatively. Frank opened one misty blue eye, lifted his head and turned away. Harry felt a twinge of remorse. "Sorry about last night. I'll bring you some tuna later, shall I?"

Frank's tail gave the tiniest flicker of acknowledgment. Harry figured that was probably the best he was going to get. He was almost out the door when he heard a distant voice call out.

"A little lemon would be lovely!"

Black House was deadly quiet except for Mad-Eye, who was heading out for yet another patrol. Down in the kitchen, feeling oddly full of energy, Harry decided everyone could eat quiche! He tied on a chef's apron and was soon kneading huge mounds of dough into his black granite countertop. By the time Remus and Mrs Weasley came down, Harry had two quiches in the oven and several more ready to go. Mrs Weasley looked around in bewilderment at all the tasty-looking dishes.

"Are you feeling well, dear?" she asked, checking Harry's forehead. Harry assured the woman he was fine.

"It's all sorted down here; why don't you go back to bed?" he suggested. "I'll send your breakfast up when the quiche is ready."

Mrs Weasley squinted blearily around the empty room.

"Oh, if you think that's best," she said, stifling a yawn. "Maybe a little lie in would be just the ticket. All that dancing last night ... haven't done that in years. Didn't you have a haircut yesterday?"

Harry shooed the woman from his kitchen and sent Remus for more supplies. "We need more eggs, bacon, bread — maybe some croissants."

Remus bent down and eyed the quiches in the oven. "Okay, but I want some of that mushroom one when I get back."

"Yes, Moony," Harry agreed, waving him off as well.

Remus had not been gone long when a flock of Ravenclaws swooped into the kitchen: Padma, Terry, Anthony, and Michael.

"Morning!" Harry greeted them cheerfully as they came up to the counter. The guests eyed each other warily before mumbling their good mornings.

"What happened to your hair?" asked Padma.

"It just grows really quickly," Harry said, turning sizzling bacon.

"You seem awfully jolly after last night ..." remarked Anthony.

Harry's face fell. "Oh that. Yeah — sorry about that. Hope I didn't wake you."

"Not at all," said Terry.

"Made getting to sleep a bit hard," Padma admitted, adding leadingly, "not knowing if You-Know-Who was up to something."

"Look, it wasn't Voldemort," Harry assured them. "Nothing to worry about — just an ordinary nightmare."

"I don't imagine there's anything ordinary about *your* nightmares," Anthony insisted, shaking his head.

"Did you notice that painting of the old woman downstairs went off first?" Terry said to his housemates.

"Yeah, and then Potter starts screaming," Anthony noted.

"Portraits have scraps of old souls in them," mused Michael. "Maybe she felt something."

"Or someone," Terry noted meaningfully. He mouthed 'You-Know-Who' to the others, who all nodded wisely.

"Look, just drop it, all right?" Harry muttered. That was all he needed: *more* conjecture about what was happening inside his warped little mind.

"And then he called out a word — what was it?" Terry continued as if Harry had not spoken.

"Megaera," Michael said, squinting. "You know, that name sounds familiar ..."

"She's just a girl I know," Harry lied, shoving a plate of sausages at him. "Sit," he ordered, waving them off.

Yanking two quiches from the oven, Harry slid the next batch in just as Susan and Hannah wandered into the kitchen, calling out their good mornings. Then Hannah saw Harry.

"Oh no!" she cried. "What happened to your hair?"

Harry rolled his eyes, growing impatient with all the questions. "I said it'd grow back."

"I didn't think you meant straight away!"

Harry smirked. "Did I forget to mention that?"

"It's almost as long as it was before Lavender touched it!"

"What did I do?" Lavender said, walking into the room with a group of fellow Gryffindors. She shrieked in horror, "*What happened to your hair?*"

She rushed to the stove and yanked at Harry's jet-black locks.

"Stop that!" Harry laughed, ducking and raising his spatula in warning.

"*Apparently*," Hannah grumbled, throwing her hands up in disgust, "it grows back the very next day!"

"You mean to say," Lavender checked incredulously, "I could cut your hair every day, and it would just grow back again — straight away?"

"Whoa, hang on!" Harry cried, backing away as Lavender, a maniacal gleam in her eye, reached for the kitchen scissors.

Laughing, Harry and Lavender circled each other. Stools flew as Harry vaulted the floury bench-top, only to be set upon by Hannah on the other side. The guests laughed and cheered the chase. Harry thought *he* was quick on his feet, but Hannah managed to out-dodge him. Ably assisted by Neville and Seamus, Hannah and Lavender finally pinned Harry down in a far corner. Lavender raised the scissors in triumph and Hannah grinned wickedly at the boy-who-so-needed-another-haircut.

"Gotcha!" declared Hannah victoriously, laughing and patting his cheek. "You should see your face!"

Lavender pushed off Harry's chest and strolled casually away.

"I mean, *really*," she sniffed, holding up the chunky kitchen scissors disdainfully, "as if I would ever use these things on someone's hair."

The room was still applauding when Remus Apparated back into the kitchen with groceries in both hands and the *Sunday Prophet* tucked under one arm. Bemused, he glanced around at the upturned chairs then spied Harry on the floor in a corner (still armed with his spatula) grinning back at him.

"Oooh, *Sunday papers!*" Lavender squealed in delight. "Are you done with the *Good Witchly Weekend Supplement*?"

Remus raised his arm a little for Lavender to extricate the *Sunday Prophet* and watched with dismay as his thick paper thinned from people grabbing sporting sections, comics, and classifieds. Harry scavenged what was left and handed it to him.

"Why don't you go down to the library?" he suggested soothingly, relieving the man of his shopping bags. "I'll make a tray for you."

"Mushroom quiche," Remus reminded Harry as he let himself be nudged out the door, "and a couple of croissants!"

"Yes, Remus," Harry said, waving him off. He busied himself making up a tray for his guardian whilst half-listening to the happy banter around the table.

"Mornin', all!" Oliver called out cheerfully. He spotted Harry and frowned with concern. "Feeling okay, laddie?" he said, his frown deepening. "And what happened to your hair?" He felt the length of his own, just to be sure. Harry let out a pitiful groan and the table burst out laughing.

"He's fine, it was just a bad dream," grinned Michael.

"Nothing to do with You-Know-Who," declared Terry.

"His hair just grows fast!" finished Anthony.

"Right ..." Oliver said dubiously, looking back to Harry, "are you sure you're okay?"

Before Harry could repeat for the *n*th time he was fine, Seamus piped up.

"So, Harry, were you sweatin' and thrashin' around in your bed?"

"No," said Harry through gritted teeth. He picked up Remus's tray and headed towards the door.

"Did you throw up?" asked Dean.

"No."

"Was someone able to wake you?" checked Neville.

"Yes."

"Yeah, he's fine ..." said Seamus dismissively, tucking into another sausage.

After delivering Remus's breakfast, Harry dutifully made up Frank's tuna, making sure to add a wedge of lemon.

"Harry!" exclaimed Lavender. "You have got to see this!"

Harry groaned. Someone from the *Prophet* had photographed him and Natalie holding hands in front of the joke shop. A second photo showed them kissing goodbye. It was only on the cheek, but the angle made it look like a lot more was going on. A third photo showed Harry and Cho, her hand pushing playfully against his chest, whilst Natalie looked on, her brow creased. The last photo showed Harry and Natalie in front of Ollivander's wand shop with Natalie looking upset and Harry looking decidedly uncomfortable. Already annoyed, Harry read the accompanying article and swore furiously. Calls of, "Show me!" erupted around the table, but Lavender held the article out of reach.

"Very pretty," she observed impishly then read out the accompanying text for the whole room, much to Harry's chagrin.

THE BOY WHO LOVED AND LOST!

By Livy.

Harry Potter (hasn't he grown!) and girlfriend Miss Natalie Ramsay break up after a lovers' spat. Sources close to the couple say they used to be inseparable, but Mr Potter just couldn't resist flirting with other girls. Quite a harem he has there! The blonde stunner and young Mr Potter enjoyed a cosy interlude out shopping, and all was just peachy for Natalie until a coven of lovely young witches caught Mr Potter's roving eye. Then it's bye-bye, Natalie! Pity the next young lovely who falls for the charms of the Boy-Who-Lived. Let's hope she's not the jealous type!

Over much sniggering and laughter around the table, Lavender grinned evilly and said, "Oooh, Cho's just gonna love this."

"Cho's gonna love what?" said the lady herself, smiling as she strolled into the kitchen.

Lavender slammed the newspaper shut. The laughter stopped immediately. Everyone looked like children caught with their fingers in the lolly jar. Cho ambled around the table towards Harry.

"You grew it back for me!" she cried gleefully, running her fingers through his hair.

"Yes!" Lavender said. "I was just saying you'd love that. You know — all messy and all ..."

Harry slid his arms around Cho and twirled her around and around, stopping only when her back was to the table. Cho laughed inside Harry's arms and kissed him full on the lips, the previous evening's tension forgotten. Anthony made a grab for the paper.

"Anyone mind if I do the crossword?" he called out.

Harry gave Anthony a minute nod of thanks over Cho's shoulder. Despite the article being a pack of lies, Harry knew Cho would explode if she saw it. And it wasn't just Cho he was worried about; he didn't know if they got the *Prophet* in Canada. What if Natalie thought he was making up stories about her? Tugging Cho away from the table, he grabbed Frank's breakfast and thrust it towards her.

"Do me a favour and take this up for my snake? I'll have your breakfast ready when you come back down."

A look of disdain flitted across Cho's face, but she accepted the chore. As soon as she was gone, Harry flew down the table, skidding to a stop behind Anthony.

"Where is it?" he demanded crossly.

Anthony tried to find it again. Harry ripped the whole supplement from his hands and strode down the room to set it alight on the kitchen stove. Two seconds later, he was yelping in pain after burning his fingers because he was watching the door instead of what he was doing. Swearing black and blue, he shoved his hand under a running tap. Ron leapt to the rescue, swatting at the fire with a tea-towel. He succeeded in setting alight a box of napkins. Viktor, happily munching on a fat slice of quiche, casually shot a jet of water across the counter, dousing both the flames and quite a bit of Ron Weasley. Hermione crawled through Harry's legs to retrieve the first-aid kit from under the sink.

"Well, that was a stupid thing to do," she observed, puffing as she stood up again. "Lucky Viktor was here."

"Just because he's got a wand," Ron muttered irritably. "What's so lucky about that?"

Harry held up two fingers. "In pain here," he said testily.

Hermione was already squeezing orange goo from a tube of Brandon's Burn Quenching Cream. Applying it to Harry's fingers, she stifled a giggle at the way Viktor was making puddles of water evaporate into clouds and rain on Ron. Ron stormed off to change; the clouds chased after him. Harry tried flexing his fingers. The sharpest pain receded immediately, leaving a general stinging that faded more slowly.

"All better now?" Hermione said kindly. "Come on — go sit down and eat something. The quiche is really good."

The show over, the room bubbled over once more with chatter, the hottest topic being the big game to be held that afternoon between Oliver's old Gryffindor side and a mixed team of members and teens led by Viktor. Harry still felt very hard done by. He squeezed into a spot at the end of the table between Susan and Michael and stabbed his fork into a plate of sausages.

"How are your fingers?" Susan asked at once.

"Fine," Harry said grumpily.

"So," Michael started delicately, "you broke up with that Natalie —"

"No," Harry cut in crankily. "We were never even going out."

Zacharias snorted a laugh. "Sure looked that way to me."

"Well, we weren't," Harry said shortly, savaging a mouthful of sausage. "I was just showing her around. Why do they have to keep making up such stupid rubbish about me?!"

"You sell papers," Susan said frankly.

"Maybe you should buy shares in the *Prophet*," Anthony suggested, ever practical. Susan shot him a withering glare.

"It'll be okay," she said to Harry. "It's obvious you're crazy about Cho; she's got to know that. She's not going to believe a gossip rag."

Michael gave that the delicate cough of disbelief it deserved.

"You know she'll see that article eventually," he said to Harry. Harry did. He finished one sausage, then another, tasting nothing, brooding.

"I'm gonna tell her," he said, pushing back from the table; he was sick of playing games. He tried not to look too pleased at the proud smile Susan gave him.

Upstairs, he could hear Cho and Mirabella in his bathroom, having a good giggle over something. Harry had a shrewd idea it was him. He had to tell her, that was all there was to it. Just get it over with. Just sit her down and tell her.

"Got a minute?" he said, leaning into the bathroom doorway.

Cho smiled and let Harry lead her over to his wingchairs to talk properly; there were a good many things Harry wanted to get straight with the girl. Sitting down, he steeled himself for battle. Cho countered that by climbing onto his lap, which Harry considered deeply unfair. Every sensible word in his head flew out the window.

When the lad failed to make a sound, Cho pressed closer and whispered in his ear, "Everything okay?"

Her lips slid across his cheek. Harry's head tried to say no, but his lips rebelled, finding themselves a little too busy to talk right now, thank you very much. Just tell her, urged an extremely annoying voice in the back of his head.

"Cho," said Harry determinedly, pulling back, "there's something I need to tell you." Cho nodded curiously. Harry moistened his lips. "In the paper this morning — there was this stupid gossip thing about us."

Cho looked surprised. "Us? Where's the article?"

"I was so angry, I burned it," said Harry. "They had photos from Diagon Alley. With you and me and Natalie. They made up all this rubbish about us." Cho started to say something, but Harry pressed on, wanting to get it all out. "They said I dumped Natalie, but I was never even going out with her. The paper made out we were having some big romance, and I dumped her because you're the one I really want. Which is true, but not the bit about me and Natalie."

Far from blowing up, Cho just waved it off, or maybe she was waving off Bruce. In any case, she said no more on the topic. Instead, she smiled softly and snuggled into Harry's chest, amusing herself by tracing her fingers around the runes printed on his T-shirt.

"Listen, I'm sorry about last night," she offered out of the blue, "but they really do look alike, and George did let me think he was Fred, rotten little snake."

A sharp hiss sounded from Harry's desk, but Harry was too busy trying to cope with the girl on his lap to worry about Frank's feelings. When Harry made no comment, Cho smiled sweetly at him and stretched up for a huge yawn, revealing a tempting glimpse of belly-button. All sorts of red started shooting through Harry's moodstone. His hands slid inside her pyjamas then climbed as high as they dared up her silken back. Her skin felt amazing.

"Stop that," she said, laughing and pulling her arms down before his hands could travel anywhere more interesting. "Hmmm, I don't suppose I could have my bath in your tub this morning, could I? I'd just love to try out all those — bubbles."

Harry's head nearly fell off from nodding. Where *had* that camera gotten to?

Cho smiled and Disapparated off his lap, leaving the lad grasping at nothing. When his heart started beating properly again, he rose unsteadily to his feet, not at all sure what just happened. A few minutes later, she skipped back into the room with toiletries and towels, and Harry fussed over showing her the bath settings. Cho nodded patiently and started undoing the top buttons of her pyjamas. A thrill of panic hammered in Harry's chest. Not for the first time he remembered that sixteen was legal for all sorts of things for Muggles. And he was practically half-Muggle.

"I suppose *next* you're going to tell me your bath's big enough for two?" Cho prompted coyly.

When Harry failed to move, Cho laughed and pushed him out of the bathroom. The lock clicked shut and the lad drew a deep steady breathing. Then his breath caught in his throat. Horrified, he lunged for his bedside table and snatched up his incriminating Snapparazzi photos. With fumbling fingers, he locked them in Hermione's treasure chest, pocketed the key, and fled the room. He didn't breathe easy again until he was safely back in the kitchen, scrubbing pots and pans.

Cho Chang: drive him to distraction though she might, Harry couldn't help remembering she was overage, gorgeous, fancied him, and, while he was down below, she was up above in his bathroom, stepping one slender leg at a time into a pile of steaming bubbles. Harry had a feeling taking a bath in that tub was never going to be quite the same again.

"You okay?" Ron said quietly to Harry over his shoulder.

Harry shook his head — hard — to clear it. "Nah, I'm good."

"So, who's this Natalie?" Ron asked. "I'd have thought you'd tell me if you had a new girlfriend — let alone you broke up with her."

Harry didn't like the hurt look in Ron's eyes one little bit. He nodded towards the pantry for a quiet word.

"Look, you've got it all wrong," started Harry. "Natalie was never my girlfriend; I only met her last week. I met her that day Fleur took me and Hermione out shopping. The paper just made up all that rubbish about us. I wasn't trying to shut you out, honest."

"So you're not still mad — about Bruce and Viktor and all?" checked Ron.

"Can't say I was thrilled," Harry admitted. Then he smiled ruefully and added, "But like I'm one to talk about being daft about a girl."

Back in the noisy kitchen, Remus was clearing his throat at the door, waiting for the noise to settle down.

"I just thought you might like to know ..." he paused to smile around at his young guests, "... Professor Dumbledore's in the bowling alley."

Bowling with Dumbledore, training tips from Viktor Krum, partying and laughing with his friends — Harry couldn't have been happier. By Sunday afternoon, he'd all but forgotten about his nightmare with the jealousy demon, but his guardian hadn't. Harry was getting dressed in his Gryffindor kit for the big game when Remus stopped by 'for a chat'. Bill Weasley was with him.

"All ready to defeat Bulgaria?" asked the Curse-Breaker.

"I wish," Harry said ruefully.

Remus picked up Harry's Omnipoculars from the mantelpiece and said, "I'll just go charm these to record the game. Erm ... Harry, why don't you and Bill have a chat?"

Remus was gone before Harry even got his head through his red and gold jersey.

"Subtle little werewolf, isn't he?" said Bill.

Harry eyed the man warily, left now in no doubt that Remus blabbed about his nightmare. In an effort to avoid talking about himself, Harry dug out Tonks's door-bolt and asked Bill to install it for him. Bill was pleased to oblige. He seemed oddly familiar with such devices.

"Yes," Bill agreed when Harry mentioned this, "six nosy little brothers and sisters will do that to you. Now, you can just close the bolt yourself, or I'll engage for you when ... ah, let's just say if circumstances warrant it. It won't stop a wand, or Apparition, or Floo entry — just ordinary doorway

transit. Oh, and it's voice activated, as well. It'll unlock if you invite someone in. It's a pretty low security thing really — just keeps polite people where you want them."

Harry was just fine with that.

"Has the swan gone?" sounded a voice from the desk.

Harry twisted around to see Frank peeking from his basket. Confused for a moment, Harry then remembered Cho's Patronus. He wondered if animals could sense other animal's spirit guardians.

"Yeah, she's gone," he said to Frank.

Frank brightened considerably and slithered down from the desk, sped across the floor and up into Harry's welcoming arms.

"He really is a beauty," Bill said admiringly.

"Oh please, stop," Frank hissed coyly.

"Bill, this is Frank," Harry said. "Frank, Bill." Harry switched to Parseltongue and added, "Bill's trying to be subtle about checking whether I'm completely nuts."

"He must have met Cho," observed Frank.

Harry choked back a laugh and grabbed his shin guards. Plonking down in a wingchair, he started strapping them on. Not wanting to be left out, Hedwig fluttered over to perch on the wing of Harry's chair. Bill sat down, too, offering small talk about the upcoming game, seemingly unperturbed by Harry's monosyllabic responses.

"Look, I'm fine, Bill," Harry said. "I don't know what Remus told you, but it was just a dream — nothing to do with Voldemort."

"Sirius?" Bill suggested quietly. Harry shook his head. Bill guessed again. "Cho?"

Harry stiffened. "Maybe ..."

"Something bothering you about her?" Bill prompted.

"Can one even count the ways?" hissed Frank from Harry's lap.

Harry gave it a good shot. He started small, but soon a long list of grievances came spilling out, things that even he wasn't aware of until he started venting: Cedric's memory always hanging between them; her jealousy; her erratic moods; her always doubting him ...

"I mean, one minute things are great," Harry finished with exasperation, "and the next it's all gone nuts again."

"Have you tried talking to her?" said Bill.

Harry's head fell back in defeat. "I try, but when I'm with her — I dunno — I just can't seem to think too straight."

Bill nodded. "When she's in your arms, reason flies out the window?"

"Exactly!" Harry said vehemently, leaning forward and squishing Frank, who squirmed free and climbed around his boy's neck. "Like, I know what I should say, right? But then we kiss or whatever and then it's gone and it's too late and I've *no* idea what just happened!"

Bill chuckled. "Tell me about it; Fleur's part Veela!"

Harry smiled reluctantly and toyed with Frank's tail.

"So, what do you do?" he asked.

Bill sighed the sigh of many men. "Whether they mean to or not, girls are very good at messing with your head. But if something bothers you, then you have to talk to her about it."

"But what if she blows up?"

"Then we'll very gently puncture her."

Harry snorted a laugh and Bill smiled a crooked smile.

"She might blow up," he conceded, "at first anyway. But listen to her, show her you're trying to see things from her point of view — but don't cave — you can't be afraid to let people know when they're hurting you." Harry nodded, but privately thought that was easier said than done with Cho. Bill nudged Harry's knee with his own and added, "Mind you, if you *really* want to get something off your chest with a girl, then it kinda helps if you're not holding her in your arms at the time."

Harry considered that very sound advice.

"You know, I probably shouldn't be telling you this," Bill said delicately, "but George was the one who put Cho's name on the guest list even

though Ginny insisted you wouldn't care one way or another. I think he was hoping something might happen between them."

"Ah," said Harry; that explained a few things.

"We Weasleys aren't always the most gracious losers," Bill admitted wryly. "If you want, I can have a word with him ..."

"Nah, it's okay," Harry said and smiled a little; sour grapes he could deal with.

"If this George wants the swan ..." Frank hissed delicately.

"That's enough from you," Harry said with a laugh. Hedwig hooted in agreement.

Bill smiled at Harry's pets.

"Shame you can only take one to Hogwarts," he said in a whisper.

Harry's smile faded; he'd been growing rather fond of Frank and didn't fancy leaving him behind.

Bill checked his watch. "I promised to pop out and pick up a couple of bottles of vodka for Viktor for tonight, but you come find me if you want to talk some more. Any time. Okay?"

"I will — thanks, Bill," said Harry. He did actually feel better having gotten a few things off his chest.

Bill was just leaving when Colin Creevey came rushing down the corridor, breathless as ever and bearing a new stack of photos.

"Get in here!" Harry hissed, yanking the boy into his room before anyone else saw him. Harry wasted no time in letting Colin know he'd rather do his own developing from now on. He tried to be nice about it, but the look on Colin's face indicated a professional's pride being deeply wounded.

"I would *never* betray your confidence!" Colin breathed, appalled at the very idea. Harry regarded the boy appraisingly: no, he probably wouldn't ... and he *was* very good at it. Harry decided to trust his instincts.

"Okay then, I appreciate your help. But remember, *no one* sees them before me!"

Harry sent a relieved Colin on his way and went to put the photos away in his treasure chest. Frank was still around his neck and keen for a peek, reminding Harry that the rest of his friends would expect to be seeing some photos, too. He decided he should make up a nice safe set to share around. Soon, the entire Potterfest weekend was laid out in a neat matrix of moving pictures across his bed: happy snaps ranging from Wheel of Destruction dares to cake-cutting with Neville to the olds swing-dancing to Quidditch games and such. Liberally scattered throughout were dozens of beautiful photos of Cho, bright-eyed and full of laughter, but there were shots of other girls, too, and these gave Harry greater pause, for he realised that shot after shot revealed Cho in the background looking jealous whenever he was enjoying another girl's company. This was hardly news to Harry, but it did startle him to see the exact same thing happening in reverse any time Cho was chatting or laughing with other boys. Seeing all the images concentrated together drove home a rather uncomfortable realisation about how alike they actually were.

Harry just didn't get it; he thought love was supposed to be this happy, wonderful thing. And yet it *was* like that when they were alone together. Deciding that reason was really not helping things, Harry divided up the photos and locked away the *if-anyone-sees-these-I'm-dead* pile, confident that if he could just make the rest of the world disappear, then him and Cho Chang would be just fine.

"Who's that?" asked Frank, nudging a Chocolate Frog Trading Card in the top tray of the treasure chest.

Harry plucked out the card and explained to Frank who Elizabeth Ramsay was. Frank looked between Harry, who was frowning slightly, and the witch in the photograph but made no comment.

"I'm hoping she might write to me," Harry said with a quiet kind of longing, "but I dunno; she's probably really busy."

It was a shame she lived so far away, he thought, she probably knew heaps about his mum — especially about how she and James Potter got together. The incident in Snape's Pensieve had really thrown Harry. Remus and Sirius hadn't wanted him to judge his father too harshly, but they were hardly objective. Returning his godmother's Frog Card, Harry carefully locked up the chest and headed back down to the pool room with an optimistic spring in his step. Hermione always seemed to notice more about relationships than he did; maybe Elizabeth would be able to explain what his mum had seen in his dad. She used to be a girl.

Saturday evening, dining alone on the balcony of her Muggle hotel room, Elizabeth Ramsay savoured a well-earned Saint-Amour cru Beaujolais, knowing that big-brother Julius would be utterly appalled. He would never consider serving an insouciant young red with smoked trout. But Julius was off in Europe with wife Dominique and daughter Natalie. Rebelliously, Elizabeth poured herself a second generous glass and gazed out into the twinkling dark. Low clouds puddled on the horizon, their frothy peaks illuminated by a smudge of crescent moon. Stretching between her and the horizon lay a dense forest, the fresh scent of crushed pine needles wafting pleasantly on the evening breeze.

After two months stuck in the wilds of Nova Scotia, the Auror had finally bested the last of a rather intransigent tribe of Aquitainian trolls that had somehow managed to turn up in Canada. The troll drool was out of her hair and soon would be heading back to base in Montreal, where the first order of business would be a much needed manicure. Whilst picking at her trout, Elizabeth tried to make sense of her hotel telephone bill — she never could work out Muggle currencies. It was worth it, though — this time she heard his voice. He even sounded like James; the shock of it had stilled her tongue. Not that she would've spoken to him; she wasn't about to risk giving Petunia Dursley another reason to break Albus

Dumbledore's sanctuary charm.

After the fall, Dumbledore made it very clear baby Harry remained at risk, insisting his place was with his family, under the inviolate protection of Lily's blood sacrifice. After what happened to the Longbottoms, no one, least of all his godmother, could argue with that. But then peaceful years began to accumulate and still Petunia refused access. Elizabeth tried forcing the woman's hand when Harry was three years old but only succeeded in frightening the poor child to death. In hindsight, appearing as a disembodied head in the Dursley fireplace had perhaps not been the cleverest of ideas. Lily's sister had been ready to break the sanctuary charm then and there, and innumerable apologies failed to pacify the hysterical woman. A few judicious Memory Charms, an expensive new electric heater, and a solemn vow that Elizabeth would never again seek out Harry without Petunia's consent, did. Elizabeth took her vows very seriously, and every year she'd ring the woman, hoping Petunia would relent and let her introduce herself to the child, but she never did. Elizabeth did manage to secure one concession; Petunia promised she would tell Harry about her, and that if he asked for her, she could visit him, but he never had.

And now ... and now Petunia's sanctuary was more crucial than ever. A Ministry dispatch six-weeks earlier confirmed what Dumbledore had been saying for the last year to anyone who'd listen: that Voldemort was resurrected. The details were vexingly sketchy, but he was definitely back — even Fudge admitted that. As soon as she saw the dispatch, Elizabeth rang Petunia to check Harry was all right. The woman confirmed he was safely returned home for the summer. Elizabeth didn't believe her until she heard his voice.

After carefully smoothing a crease in her fluffy towelling robe, Elizabeth poured herself a third glass of Saint-Amour. Two was usually her limit, but she had nowhere to go and no one to be the least bit responsible for. Next door, a pair of honeymooners was busy being alone. They were very sweet, but after their third night of wedded bliss, Elizabeth felt obliged to make a discreet gift of a Silencing Charm on their room. How she envied them, fresh-faced young things full of hopes and dreams. Staring out into the night, she nursed the 'wine of love' against her lips, automatically identifying floral whiffs of strawberry and — was that violet? She could feel her cheeks going a little numb, and if she sank into her director's chair and squinted, she could pretend the clouds were the shoulders of a man, and the Moon his puny little head. She raised her glass to Mr Moon then downed it in one lengthy choking swig.

Her mind turned back to Petunia Dursley. For the longest time, Elizabeth suspected her of renegeing on her promise to tell Harry about her, but that doubt had been put to rest two summers ago. Within hours of Sirius's escape from the Dementors at Hogwarts, Fawkes delivered news of his innocence to what was left of the old Order of the Phoenix.

Elizabeth slid even deeper into her canvas seat, her red-painted toes stretching across the cold concrete. Her gaze fell again on the Moon, her constant, wretched companion. Mr Moon stared back at her impassively.

Sirius's innocence came as no surprise to Elizabeth; she'd known Sirius Black since they were toddlers fighting over toy brooms in the stuffy corridors of the Most Noble and Ancient Houses of Black and Ramsay. She'd been in Egypt when Fawkes delivered the news, and went straight to the late Alphard Black's secret-island sanctuary. There, off the ancient city of Carthage, she found the shattered shell of the man she'd known — blessedly sane if not whole. Sirius revealed he'd been hiding in the Forbidden Forest all year, and when he told Harry he was his godfather, Harry said he already knew. After learning of Petunia's restrictions, Sirius immediately offered to tell the boy to write to Elizabeth, but Elizabeth just as swiftly promised to curse him to Hades if he did any such thing. For one thing, the boy was nearly fourteen-years old and well capable of deciding for himself who he wanted in his life. And for another, Petunia would surely find out. And then there was Remus. Elizabeth eyed Mr Moon broodingly.

"Another?" she said to him. "Don't mind if I do." With a limp flick of her wand, she floated the Saint-Amour off the table and had it refill her glass. From what Sirius told her before returning to England, Remus was teaching at Hogwarts. Elizabeth knew she'd be no more welcome there than at Privet Drive. "To your health, sir," she said dully.

She sipped her fourth glass more slowly, rolling the wine of love around her tongue, savouring both the taste of strawberries and the blessed numbing of her senses. She could use a little numb tonight. By the time her glass was empty again, she was feeling a good deal more than a little numb. The Saint-Amour nudged her shoulder, keen to be of further service. Elizabeth flicked it away, but misjudged and sent it arcing over the balcony.

"Shit!"

Lunging across the handrail, she caught the bottle by the neck and dangled there, doubled over like a rag doll, watching her wand and her wine glass go tumbling into the trees below. She just hung there for a few minutes, content to watch her red toes wiggling at her. Dragging herself to a standing position, she rolled away from Mr Moon and clutched at the handrail behind her. There was still some love left; no point in wasting it, she thought, taking a swig straight from the bottle. Wiping her mouth off on the back of her hand, Elizabeth giggled to think of how perfectly scandalised brother Julius would be if he could see his baby sister right now.

On her table-for-one, a handsome slice of Black Forest cake waited patiently beneath a single red candle. Elizabeth didn't know what had possessed her to order it. Maybe Mr Moon would like it? She laughed humourlessly and took another swig of velvety wine. Mr Moon just loved the Black Forest. Dessert plate in hand, she wheeled around, arms swinging, and magnanimously offered it to him.

"No?" she said, listing drunkenly; the world was spinning in a most impudent way. "Pity."

She took another swig of love and glared at fuzzy Mr Moon, so puffy and smug.

"I'm not afraid of you!" she declared boldly.

Mr Moon knew she was lying.

Her head bowed, Elizabeth spotted something in the tree below her; was that her wand? Pine needles swam in and out of focus. She had to get closer. With her dessert plate in one hand and the now empty Saint-Amour in the other, she leaned across the rail, squinting into the trees,

balancing across her belly, her toes curled under the foot rail. If she could just reach a bit further ... just a bit further —

A great yelp sounded, followed by the rustling of branches then a thud. Winded, Elizabeth reached under her back to dislodge a pinecone. More rustling sounded and something hard and pointy fell on her forehead.

"Ow," she moaned pitifully, rubbing her head, but at least she had her wand back. Rolling onto her stomach, she jammed her throbbing forehead into the forest floor and held herself as still as a mouse, willing the world to stop spinning. The world flatly refused to cooperate. She knew she had to get up. She'd get up in a minute, just a minute.

Evil licked her awake.

Elizabeth pushed the Kneazle away and rolled onto her back, blinking blearily as she tried to gain her bearings. It was still dark. Twigs were stuck to her face, and one of her elbows was deep in something horribly moist and squishy. She staggered to her feet only to fall to her hands and knees again. Evil scampered out of the line of fire. The world reeled and Elizabeth lunged for a tree, pressing her flaming cheek into the bark. Squeezing shut her eyes, she Apparated back to her room. The tree came with her. It made rather a mess of the carpet — and the ceiling — but she'd fix it in the morning, the morning. Fumbling in the dark, she fell with relief onto the bed, inspiring three horrified screams.

The honeymooners awoke next morning nestled blissfully in each other's arms, remembering only that they were happier than they'd ever been. Their good mood only increased on discovering that the nice lady from number three sent them an enormous hamper of Krug Champagne and Belgian chocolates. The 'nice lady' herself sat slumped on her balcony behind a pair of very dark sunglasses, clutching an extra-strong cup of coffee and nibbling on a dry water-cracker. It was all the breakfast she could stomach.

A flutter of something caught her bloodshot blue eyes, which narrowed to track an owl incoming — an express owl at that. She groaned inwardly, wondering who she'd managed to tick off this time. Her French Quebecois boss at the Canadian Ministry of Magic had been delighted to send her trolling through the mountains for months, and she was certain that *this* owl would send her off on yet another trivial matter, yet again chasing down something very green or very slimy or both. Going over the heads of her superiors to push through the Wolfsbane Programme Legislation had come at a price but well-worth it. The barn owl that landed on her table looked even more worse for wear than she did. Elizabeth untied a lumpy letter and noticed it was Werewolf Registry business, postmarked from London. She felt a small rush of adrenaline, but set the letter aside in order to give the tired owl some treats and water.

"You have come a long way," she murmured sympathetically. The owl hooted in agreement and settled down to wait for a response.

Picking up the jangling letter, Elizabeth turned it over and froze in shocked surprise on seeing the Black family seal. She took off her sunglasses and held up the envelope gingerly, as if a Howler lurked inside, ready to explode. As a schoolgirl, a lumpy letter from the House of Black meant being drenched in Stinksap, or showered with flaming confetti, or, if she was really lucky, being set upon by drunk Cornish Pixies. Elizabeth really didn't think she was up to one of Sirius's pranks this morning.

Ten minutes later, the Auror had thrown every poison and jinx detection charm she could think of at the envelope and still found nothing amiss. Opening it at last, she found ten English Galleons and a note addressed to 'Dear Madam Ramsay', which she read with growing bemusement until she realised it wasn't from Sirius.

... Any help you could give me would be greatly appreciated!

Yours sincerely,

Harry Potter

"YES!" yelped Elizabeth, startling the barn owl and sending cold coffee flying. "Oh, sorry, sorry. No, no, stay, please!"

The owl stayed but hooted disapprovingly at the excited ruckus the woman continued to make. When Elizabeth calmed down a little, she picked up Harry's letter again; there was a postscript:

P.S. I've enclosed return postage — I hope English Galleons are okay. Please send your reply care of the Post Office in Diagon Alley, London, UK (sorry, I'm kind of in hiding and my house is under a Fidelius Charm).

A Fidelius? Elizabeth glanced again at the Black House seal. The sanctuary charm would go wherever Petunia was, of course, but she couldn't see Petunia living willingly in Sirius's house. Wherever Harry was, it must be a temporary situation. There could be no question of allowing Dumbledore's charm to break — not with Voldemort at large. At least she and Petunia could agree on that. And then there was Lily's secret curse to consider. Cast when her baby was still in the womb, Lily's over-protectiveness meant Harry had a second reason for needing Petunia. Elizabeth shuddered to think what ancient magic might awake in the child should he lose his surrogate mother before he came of age.

There was one simple way to find out what was going on. Elizabeth reached for the telephone and dialled the Dursley's home number. A boy answered.

"What d'you want?" he said rudely.

"Hello," Elizabeth said, forcing a bright tone, "may I please speak with Harry Potter?" The boy snorted something unintelligible; Elizabeth tried again. "May I speak with Mrs Dursley?"

"MUM! Someone's after Harry!"

There was a lengthy pause, filled with muffled, angry voices.

"Mum says you can just piss off!" snarled the boy and he hung up, just like that.

Livid, Elizabeth could do no more than glare impotently at the telephone. This was getting her nowhere; she needed to deal with the wretched woman in person. Harry had at last asked for his godmother's help. And even if he did just want some potions tips, Elizabeth was more than delighted to oblige him. Petunia Dursley was *not* going to stop her this time!

Impulsively, she sat down and wrote a quick note begging a leave of absence from the Canadian Ministry. She wrapped it up with her report — and a small biscuit tin containing the offending trolls — and sent it off with the owl (adding a small pouch of coins for postage). Firing her wand impatiently at her few possessions, Elizabeth quickly shrank them and sent them hurtling into her Graphorn-hide rucksack. Evil reared his golden-flecked head out of the faded-purple bag, growling with displeasure as tiny books and shoes whizzed past his tufted ears.

She was going home.

Elizabeth suddenly realised her hands were shaking. Stopping herself, she pulled Evil out of the bag to give him a cuddle. He accepted her apology and snuggled into her chest. Elizabeth paced around the room, stroking Evil's ears and assessing her options. She was authorised to create Portkeys for emergencies, but she somehow doubted that paying a visit to her godson to teach him triple-handed stirring methods would be viewed as a life and death situation — even if he was Harry Potter. It was a Sunday morning, so none of the Ministry Transportation Centres would be open. She did some quick calculations on the flying distance to England. It would take a week to cover the distance at ordinary broomstick speeds, but Elizabeth had no intention of doing that. Not when she could Hyper-Fly.

Hyper-Flying involved a complex combination of Apparition and flying that allowed broomstick flights over international distances. It was a dangerous choice, since people were known to grow very weak and dizzy from repeated Apparition, and having to search for a lost leg or eyeball somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean would not be fun. Still, it would mean she could reach London the same day, even with all the jumps and navigation checks. If she opted for public transportation, she'd need to wait until the next Friday. Waiting a week was much more logical, much safer, much more sensible, she just had to exercise patience. Elizabeth was never very good at patience.

Two hours later, she lost an eyebrow over the Mid-Atlantic; at the three-hour mark, she started losing fingernails; after five hours, her right hand grew worryingly wobbly. At last she spotted the wonderfully relieving sight of land. Ireland or Cornwall — she didn't care; it was close enough. Landing atop a coastal cliff, she sat down on the grass and assessed her options. She could push on, or she could rest and try to visit Harry after supper. A sudden gust of wind and a wave of nausea from her multiple Splinchings helped make the decision. Long years of practice in the field saw the Auror running now on autopilot. She found a sheltered field, unclipped a tiny tent from her charm-bracelet, and enlarged it to set up a medium-security base. Soon, if any Muggle happened to pass by, they would merely see a rather tired old cow grazing by a tree, but the tired old cow would, in fact, be comfortably ensconced in a two-bedroom tent, regrowing her fingernails and other minor body parts.

When she was more of herself again, Elizabeth packed up her tent, miniaturised it, and clipped it back onto her charm-bracelet. Evil crawled back into the rucksack whilst she cast a few more spells to disguise her travel-worn clothes. She couldn't help throwing in a few extra illusions to give the impression (at least to the Muggles) she had impeccably groomed hair, make-up, and nails.

It was after eight o'clock on Sunday evening when Elizabeth drew a deep, settling breath, threw caution to the wind, and Apparated the full distance to a certain Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 10 – The Main Game

It was Sunday afternoon of the Potterfest weekend and the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix was overflowing with members and guests. Mad-Eye Moody stood vigil at the poolroom door, regulating traffic to avoid waking up Mrs Black. Seamus rushed into the room then backtracked, seemingly having forgotten something.

“Either you’re in or you’re out!” Moody growled, grabbing Seamus by the scruff of the neck.

“Sorry, Mad-Eye — only be a sec,” called Seamus, slipping from his grasp.

“That’s Professor Mad-Eye to you, Sonny!” grumbled Moody, looking quite harried. “Teenagers!” he snorted. “Give me Death Eaters any day!”

The Ravenclaw boys cornered Harry, eager to examine the photos he’d brought downstairs. Anthony, Michael, and Terry’s looks of gleeful anticipation faded the longer they flicked at speed through the happy snaps. Harry hid a smile and ambled off; he had already carefully extracted the most interesting shots.

“Harry!” Hestia Jones cried, beckoning him over. “Just the young man I wanted to see!” She tugged a black-haired witch towards them. “Gwenog, this is our young man! Harry, may I introduce my sister Gwenog?”

Harry happily shook hands with the Holyhead Harpies captain. “Thank you so much for coming! It’s just *fantastic!*”

“My pleasure,” Gwenog said easily, her grip strong but not overbearing, “and Happy Birthday!”

Before Harry could reply, Oliver dashed up to them.

“Gwenog!” he cried, pumping her hand. “This is an unexpected delight!” His face fell when he noticed her Quidditch kit bag. “Er, Gwenog?”

The Harpies’ captain just smiled sweetly and nodded hello to Viktor, who had ambled over to join them.

“Can’t let the PU boys have all the fun,” she said, “now can we?”

Struck quite dumb, Oliver’s eyes widened in horror as Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared on Viktor’s other side, casually slapping a Beater’s bat against the palm of his hand. Charlie and Tonks lined up, as well. Oliver sputtered incoherently for a full minute before turning to the room.

“**GRYFFINDOR! CHANGE ROOM! NOW!!!**”

Fred and George had managed to forget to reveal just how many quality players would be lining up for Viktor’s Vultures. Viktor Krum, Gwenog Jones, and Charlie Weasley were enough to give any opposition captain shivers.

“Oliver, calm down, *please!*” begged Alicia, trying to catch the Keeper as he stormed around the changing room.

Oliver spun on Fred and George.

“Kids and olds, you said!” he said, nodding to them, a wild look in his eyes. “Aye, aye, just a *friendly*, you said! **I CANNA LOSE TO A HARPIE!**”

Working together, the team finally managed to calm Oliver down a little, Fred surreptitiously casting a light Cheering Charm on his captain. Oliver insisted on creating a complex game strategy — well, as best he could between occasional hysterical giggling fits — and rapidly dissected the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition. The Vultures’ Keeper was most obvious weak spot. Harry felt bad for Ron; he was sure his best mate would have been playing for Viktor but for the small matter of sacking ten-thousand blowflies on him. Instead, the coveted position went to the inexperienced Padma Patil. Oliver conjured a three-dimensional model of a Quidditch pitch, complete with tiny fliers, and sent them attacking and counter-attacking each other with maniacal relish.

Angelina critically examined her own little action figure. “My bum is *not* that big!”

Oliver let out a strangled cry and a vein throbbed in his temple Harry thought would have done Uncle Vernon proud. Fred hastily assured Oliver they were taking the game in Harry’s back yard very seriously, indeed. Oliver, accepting the assurance at face value, slowly began to calm down, but he would continue to strategise right up until game time.

Passing through the noisy bar, Harry was startled by the number of members. Madam Hooch and Madam Pomfrey generously provided their services, but Harry wasn’t sure if that meant they were members. Mundungus was hustling the room, taking bets on the game. Madam Amelia Bones and Professor Minerva McGonagall, sharing a private wager and a couple of large Sherries, had taken seats on either side of Lee Jordan on the poolroom balcony — and Lee didn’t look at all happy with the arrangements. Both women were armed with what Harry hoped were fake Beaters’ bats. Harry gamely knelt down beside his Head of House for a quiet word, but although she wished him a hearty Happy Birthday, she wouldn’t bend on the one-pet rule. He could bring a snake for a pet but not an owl as well. Harry expected as much but felt it was worth a shot.

Flying out into the pitch, he did a sweep of the tall grandstands, smiling to his friends congregated in adjoining towers: one for Gryffindor and one for Vultures. Wearing screeching animal hats scored from Elphias Doge and Dedalus Diggle, the DA members were all cheering and dancing in

stands to music Lee was pounding out across the ground.

Pre-game nerves finally caught up with Harry, and when George swept close to shake his hand before the game, Harry inadvertently cut him and kept flying. Oliver called his team together. Harry avoided George's eye. In truth, he was more embarrassed than angry by now. Oliver carefully appraised each player inside the scarlet and gold huddle, but for once he couldn't seem to think of anything to say and just stuck his hand into the centre of the huddle. The rest of the team followed suit, gripping hand over hand, before chanting as one the Gryffindor team motto: *Fortune favours the brave!*

"AND THEY'RE OFF LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" Lee roared into his megaphone. "Charlie Weasley takes the Quaffle. Has the old Gryffindor Seeker got what it takes to Chase? He dodges a Bludger from brother Fred. Passes to Smith. Back to Charlie. Charlie enters goals ... HE SHOOTS! ... WOOD BLOCKS! Recovers Quaffle ... Passes off to Spinnet. Gryffindor Chasers forming up ... Looks like a Hawkshead ... Nice and tight — a real babe sandwich ... OW! Sorry, Professor ... OUCH! Not you, too, Madam Bones! All right already! OH, HERE WE GO! Jones sends a mighty Bludger through the Hawkshead ... Spinnet spins out of danger ... Jones belts a second Bludger to Potter ... He ducks just in time ... JOHNSON SHOOTS! ... SHE SCORES! LIONS TEN — VULTURES NIL!"

The crowd roared for the goal, and Harry corkscrewed away from Gwenog, spinning down to catch up with Viktor again. Viktor appeared unperturbed by his hanger on and continued scanning the pitch for the Golden Snitch, effortlessly swooping this way and that. Accelerating, he pulled away a little and Harry relaxed into his wake. Tonks, looking wonderfully strange with spiky pink hair above a real vulture's face, took a shot at goals. Oliver executed a stylish save.

"NICE!" Lee called out. "You don't see the Starfish defence every day."

Gwenog Jones was all over the Gryffindor Chasers, masterfully maintaining control of the Bludgers. Fred and George defended the girls when they could, putting their bats and bodies on the line, but they had their own orders from Oliver: keep Krum off the Snitch!

"WHOA! That Harpie's everywhere!" Lee called, as Jones cleared another path for her own Chasers. "Smith enters goals ... No — it's a feint! Offloads over the shoulder to Charlie — Wood's caught napping! ... THE DRAGON TAMER SCORES!"

All around the ground, vultures shrieked and lions growled. Furious, Oliver hurled the Quaffle back to Madam Hooch and play resumed. A glint of gold flashed past the Seekers and Viktor darted away from Harry, but Harry anticipated the shift and took Krum's air space, forcing the Bulgarian to foul him.

"KRUM FOULS THE SEEKER!" cried Lee. "PENALTY TO LIONS!"

Angelina converted the penalty against a frightened Padma. The Seekers continued sweeping the pitch, but the Snitch was long gone. Viktor started making more of an effort to lose Harry and the twins. The twins struggled but Harry clung to Viktor like Stinksap.

Viktor glanced back at him and called out with a crooked smile, "I think you verse than Bruce!"

Harry grinned back at him and continued dogging Viktor's increasingly erratic moves. Meanwhile, Katie sped towards the Vultures' goals. Gwenog accelerated and swept a bludger timed to arrive ahead of Katie's path then hurtled forward to backhand it into the girl's side. Fred suddenly reared between the fliers, deflecting the bludger into Padma, giving Padma a bloody nose and Katie time to score another goal.

"LIONS THIRTY — VULTURES TEN!" cried Lee.

As the game progressed, Harry found it harder to stay in touch with Krum. Viktor, on the other hand, didn't seem nearly as stretched as Harry would've liked. Harry wiped the sweat from his brow and dug deeper, trying to anticipate Viktor's moves. He swerved too close and Viktor caught him off guard. Something Madam Hooch's eagle eyes did not miss.

"FOUL!" Lee cried. "Potter pinned for Blatching Krum! Penalty to Vultures: Potter flying with intent to collide."

Viktor chuckled and sped away, Harry in close pursuit. Weaving through the other players, the Seekers were largely oblivious to the rest of the game. At first, Harry couldn't understand why Jones wasn't going after him, then he twigged that the Vultures knew, just as well as the Gryffindors did, that they couldn't afford to let the Lions get more than one hundred and fifty points ahead. Far from being beaten bloody by the opposition's mighty Beaters, Harry was more or less ignored, which suited him just fine. Harry followed his captain's orders, dogging Viktor and scoring five more penalty shots for Gryffindor. The first four were converted by his Chasers. Alicia lined up to take the fifth.

"Spinnet powers towards the lovely young Ravenclaw," called Lee. Cheers and stomping feet resounded around the ground. "Spinnet fires, aim looks good, but Patil — yes — she dodges back and — EXCELLENT SAVE!"

Vulture shrieks exploded all around the ground — along with a lone, piercing howl.

"OHO!" Lee cried blissfully. "Patil earns a rare Harpie Howler from Jones! A *huge* compliment to the beautiful young Keeper! Anyone else get turned on by that? OW! Sorry, Professor. HEY! Madam Bones! Quit ganging up on me!"

Harry wished he could risk a glance to see what was happening to Lee on the balcony, but Viktor, who had given away fifty points in penalties to Harry, decided it was time to get shake off his annoying little tag-along. The Bulgarian drew Harry high above the pitch before falling into a tearing dive.

"WRONSKI!" Lee screamed. "CAN ANYONE SEE THE SNITCH?"

Both Seekers knew there was no Snitch at the end of the dive, but Harry could not afford to lose touch with Viktor and hurtled madly after him.

Slipping inside the other Seeker's wake, Harry just barely managed to keep up. The Gryffindor Beaters had no chance. When Viktor pulled up just above ground level, Harry dodged out of view then back. Struggling to stay in control at such speed, Fred fell back and George ploughed into the grass. Viktor glanced around, initially pleased, but then very annoyed to find Harry still on his tail. Viktor dodged and weaved, but Harry had a few sneaky moves, too, and when Lee announced another Gryffindor goal, Viktor scowled deeply and roared to his Beaters.

"**TAKE OUT SEEKER!**"

Harry flew even closer to Viktor, figuring he'd at least have cover from in front. The extra training he'd received from Remus and Viktor had been helping him all game, but now it came into play more than ever as Viktor made a concerted effort to lose his annoying little parasite. Harry risked a glance to the scoreboard: one-hundred-and-fifty to ten. They just needed *two* more goals before Harry was allowed to go on the offensive for the Snitch! A sudden roar erupted from the stands but nothing happened that Harry could see.

"Yes, folks," Lee cried gleefully, "we just hit the one-hour mark! Sorry, Dung!"

Harry took advantage of the distraction to creep closer to Viktor, coming up on his left flank, just in time, too, as a Bludger from nowhere scraped the tail of Harry's broom. With an amiable wave to Gwenog, Viktor glanced left then dodged right, broke and reversed, wrong-footing Harry and gaining an immediate ten-yard break. Harry swore under his breath; he was now wide open to attack. Both of the Vulture's black-robed Beaters grinned evilly and circled Harry, fast and menacingly. Trapped, Harry dodged madly this way and that trying to evade them as they traded Bludgers, with him as piggy-in-the-middle.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen," Lee called, "the Vultures are circling!" Groans echoed around the stands, but Lee laughed. "What? Come on, you knew I had to slip that in!"

Harry got a break past Kingsley but couldn't lose Gwenog; she anticipated his every move. Too many of her precision Bludgers found their target, connecting three times with Harry's right shoulder.

"**JOHNSON SCORES!**" cried Lee. "**YOU LITTLE RIPPER! LIONS ONE-SIXTY — VULTURES TEN!**"

Come on girls, Harry begged silently, just one more goal!

"Vultures with possession ..." Lee said. "Charlie's got the Quaffle ... to Smith — to Tonks — to Charlie ... **CHARLIE'S HIT!** ... Nasty blow to the knee. Manages to offload to Smith ... Jones sends a howling Bludger into Wood ... Wood's hit! NO!" Lee wailed. "OW! Madam Bones! I mean, er, Smith scores. Well done, Vultures."

Vultures all around the ground shrieked in ecstasy. The teens' towers shook perilously, wild cheers bellowing from both stands. Harry groaned; Gryffindor were now only one-forty ahead again; time to get desperate. He flew hard and fast straight towards Kingsley. The two-hundred-pound Auror tried to get out of his way, but Harry was too quick. He was already pulling clear when Kingsley reflexively swiped at him in self-defence, his bat connecting hard with Harry's shoulder.

"**PENALTY TO LIONS!**" cried Lee. "**BEATING WITH INTENT!** ... Bell lines up the penalty ... Oooh, nice try by Patil, but Gryffindor converts another penalty. Lions now one-fifty ahead. Interesting manoeuvre from Potter. Is that boy a glutton for punishment or what? **HEY!** Will you quit thumping me, Professor? ... What do you mean you've been wanting to do this for years?"

Distracted, Harry ducked one Bludger from Gwenog Jones only to have a cannon-like second slam into his knee with a sickening crunch, knocking him straight off his Firebolt. The crowd screamed and Harry grabbed madly at the air rushing through his flailing robes. Then something whacked him from behind and snagged his wrist, halting his fall. Dangling, one-armed, Harry felt something crack and screamed in agony. The rest of his nightmare came true when he realised who caught him. He loosed another scream mixed with pain and frustration.

"**GET OFF!**" he roared, twisting irrationally, only succeeding in further damaging his shoulder.

George's grin faded but he didn't let go until Harry was only a few feet above the ground. Then he released the Seeker and swept across the grass to recover his fallen Firebolt. Harry scrambled after him — or tried to. His leg gave way and he was obliged to hop on one foot, his bad shoulder drooping, waiting for George to double back.

"Give it here!" he muttered, grabbing at the Firebolt, but George didn't let go.

The few moments they stood there, each with a hand on the broom, seemed to last forever. The game and crowds roared on far above them, quite ignored. George moistened his lips and tipped his head slightly towards the grandstands.

"Girls," he offered.

Harry couldn't have said it more eloquently.

"I — er — I might have been trying to wind you up last night," George confessed.

A crooked smile wriggled onto Harry's face. It was all he needed to hear. Girls came and went; mates were mates forever.

"S'okay," he said, "she thought you were Fred."

"**JOHNSON SCORES!**" cried Lee.

George and Harry loosed matching whoops of joy; Gryffindor was one-sixty ahead! A surge of adrenaline helped Harry take flight. Forgetting the pain, he stopped chasing Krum and turned to chasing the Golden Snitch! The twins were now completely ignoring Krum, too, but it didn't

matter. As long as Gryffindor stayed far enough ahead, it made no difference at all if Krum took the Snitch. George belted a Bludger through the Vulture's Chasers, and the crowd gasped as Tonks spiralled wildly downwards, blood spurting freely from above one black vulture-eye.

"OOOH," Lee cried sympathetically. "That's gotta hurt! But the old Hufflepuff's hanging on. Legend. Bad pass to Smith — recovered by Charlie ... Will you look at that carrot-topped Vulture fly! Bung knee and all! Jones sends a Bludger into George ... Gets him in the back. It's getting' bloody, ladies and gentlemen. And about time, too!" Lee roared happily. "OW! What did I say?"

Harry spared a glance towards the vicious melee of Chasers fighting over the Quaffle; the Vultures were getting way too much possession! Gryffindor could not afford to lose its lead! Corkscrewing through the players, Harry narrowly ducked another Bludger from Gwenog. Fred appeared from nowhere to wallop it into Kingsley. More Bludgers whizzed past Harry's ears. He was dimly aware of the roaring crowd, but his thoughts were fixed on just one tiny thing.

"OHO! Potter's seen something!" yelled Lee.

The Golden Snitch raced higher and higher then changed tack. Harry broke hard and raced after it, swearing furiously; it was heading straight towards Viktor! Fred pelted a bludger towards him. Krum effortlessly eluded the Bludger. The crowd, on their feet, now, howled the Seekers on. Fred and George doubled up on Viktor, slowing him down but only slightly.

"CHARLIE SCORES!" screamed Lee. "LIONS ONE-EIGHTY — VULTURES THIRTY! WILL KRUM GO FOR A TIE? JOHNSON TAKES THE QUAFFLE — TO BELL — TO SPINNET — BACK TO JOHNSON ..."

The Seekers were neck and neck, speeding around the pitch, flying low over the thrilled spectators, twisting madly through the grandstand towers. Kingsley belted a Bludger towards Harry. Harry dodged just in time.

"SHACKLEBOLT TAKES OUT HIS OWN SEEKER!" Lee bellowed gleefully.

Viktor wasn't out of action long. All too soon, Harry could feel him hot on his tail and steadily accelerating. Keeping Viktor on his right, Harry held on with everything he had. Viktor drew ahead, his hand outstretched. He banked slightly to the left, but Harry was ready and blocked him, buying his Chasers a crucial few extra seconds. The crowd roared just before Viktor's hand closed on the Golden Snitch.

"SPINNET SCORES!" Lee screamed. "KRUM TAKES THE SNITCH! BUT IT'S TOO LATE! GRYFFINDOR WINS!"

The arena exploded into life: animals screeching, hats flying, and grandstands rocked. Spectators shot wand sparks and silver arrows high and wide over the pitch. Viktor and Harry drifted to a mid-air stop and slumped tiredly over their broom handles.

"Chudesen," Viktor rasped with a crooked grin, swiping the back of his hand across his bloody face. "Good game!" he declared, pressing the Golden Snitch into Harry's hand. "I think you belong to this!" Viktor clapped the young Seeker on the back. "Maybe even you *do* play for England some day!"

His eyes shining, Harry closed trembling fingers on the bloodied, fluttering ball. He was never, ever going to wash this Snitch.

By the time he and Viktor landed on the grass, Madam Pomfrey was already tending the wounded. Harry, grinning from ear to ear, fell off his Firebolt and collapsed, utterly spent, flat on his back. His bruised and bloodied teammates collapsed, laughing and cheering, on top of him. Harry grunted in pain, barely able to draw breath. The other players finally rolled off long enough to drag Harry to his feet. Harry weaved unsteadily for about three seconds before he was crash-tackled by the rest of his friends pelting across the pitch.

"An hour-fifty!" Ron crowed, pulling Harry back to his feet to pump his hand. He slapped him on the shoulder and merrily declared, "Five Galleons, I won!"

Harry nodded dazedly and tried to breathe through the pain. He spotted Remus and stumbled over to him.

"Moony! Did you see my Wronski?" he demanded breathlessly, clutching at the man's robes for support. "And my dodge? Did you see the look on Viktor's face? He had *no idea* where I was! *Did you see?*"

"I saw!" Remus laughed, pulling him into a hug. "You did great!"

Harry collapsed into his guardian's shoulder, content to just lean there a moment. Then he lifted his eyes and spotted Alicia being held aloft by the twins.

"You're a legend, Ali!" he called out happily. "I was so relieved when she scored," he said to Remus, puffing. "I just couldn't hold him off any longer! Don't lose these!"

Harry shoved the Snitch and his Firebolt into Remus's hands before stumbling off to find Cho — and score a nice big congratulatory kiss! He just reached her when someone suddenly turned off the Sun.

Nervous giggles flitted around the blackened pitch then yelps of delight. A single scarlet and gold phoenix erupted from the middle of the pitch. The phoenix grew larger and larger until it exploded in a rush of magical flames, crumbled into ashes then started all over again. Standing with Viktor, Bill, and Fleur, Cho gasped and giggled inside Harry's arms. He snuggled close behind her and kissed her cheek, watching her upturned face reflecting green, gold, and red, as different fireworks passed overhead. Cold with sweat, he started growing light-headed and tried hard to push back the mounting pain in his neck.

"If only Cedric were here," Cho remarked sadly into the sparkling dark, "then we'd have all four Tri-Wizard Champions."

Sharp gasps sounded. Nausea rose in Harry's chest and he staggered backwards, colliding painfully with Viktor. A dragon roared past and exploded in an extravagant display of blinding green light. Laughter pounded in Harry's ears. Someone grabbed at him, and he collapsed in agony, his glasses falling to the ground. Clutching at the grass, his eyes darted around the graveyard. More Death Eaters grabbed at him; he frantically fought them off. Where was his wand! A tall young man was shaking him; golden light flared over the man's hair.

"Ced — Cedric?" rasped Harry, dizzy with pain and nausea. He lunged at the man's robes and whispered feverishly, "You have to get out of here!"

"Harry! It's Bill," said the young man, shaking him again, "Bill Weasley."

His mind addled with pain, Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to focus on the man's face.

"Bill?" he repeated dazedly.

Bill nodded with relief. He and Viktor tried to pull Harry to his feet, but Harry collapsed again, crying out and clutching his shoulder. Fingers probed his body. Squeezing his eyes shut, Harry tried to breathe through the pain. Bill issued quick orders. Harry thought he heard Fleur yelling at someone in a fast and furious mixture of French and English. The next thing he knew, he was being floated through the crowd on a stretcher.

"He'll be fine," he heard Bill say gruffly to the voices around him. "He's just in shock — looks like he busted his collar-bone in the game."

Harry opened his eyes just long enough to see his Remus striding along beside him. Then he passed out.

Harry awoke to find Madam Pomfrey standing over him, a familiar look of resignation on her face as she waved some kind of brass looking-glass over his body. Harry tried to gain his bearings. He was in his bedroom, lying on his bed, stripped to the waist. Frank dangled overhead, peering down intently. Remus and Bill were there, too. Harry winced inwardly; had he called the man Cedric?

"Harry?" murmured the school nurse. "Just lie still. There's a good lad. Almost done."

"How are you feeling?" Remus asked him.

"Fine," Harry lied. Madam Pomfrey grunted her opinion of that. "Bit sore," Harry admitted, "bit groggy." He tried to sit up. Madam Pomfrey pushed him firmly back down.

"Fifteen more minutes before you even *think* of moving, Mr Potter! I'll just be down in the changing rooms if you need me."

"Is Tonks okay?" asked Harry.

"Yes, dear," she said, patting his good shoulder. "I just need to see to Mr Shacklebolt's thigh — he's the last. He's in quite a mess, but he insisted you be treated before him."

"Thanks, Madam Pomfrey," Harry said, smiling weakly. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

Poppy Pomfrey blushed slightly, mumbled that it was nothing, and urged the young man to consider taking up a less brutal sport.

"Remus?" prompted Bill. "Why don't you go with Madam Pomfrey — see how Kingsley's doing?"

Remus seemed reluctant until Bill tipped his head meaningfully back towards Harry.

"Ah ... okay," Remus agreed, playing along. "Just give a shout if you need me."

Once they were alone, Bill reached for Harry's discarded Quidditch robe and draped it over him to keep him warm then conjured a wooden chair from thin air. Facing it the wrong way, he straddled the chair and crossed his arms casually over the backrest to be eye-to-eye with the boy.

"Harry —" started Bill.

"Look, I'm sorry," Harry cut in miserably. "I know Cedric is dead. Everyone must think I'm mental."

"No, no," Bill said quickly, "not at all. Older and wiser heads than yours have been caught unawares by flashbacks — those green dragons kind of freaked me out, too."

Harry sucked in a breath. Bill offered him a sad half-smile.

"I was eleven," he said quietly. "There was an attack in broad daylight in Diagon Alley — this was in the first war of course — summer before you were attacked. Mum took me down to get school supplies. I was well-excited. We weren't allowed out much in those days. A dozen Death Eaters staged an attack — right outside Fred and George's shop, now I think of it. Never saw anything like it. It was like the very air turned green. Bodies everywhere, and not just adults but little kids — babies — they weren't choosy. People were screaming — getting trampled. I lost Mum running for cover. She was hysterical when she found me. It was over in minutes but seemed to go on forever, you know?"

Harry said nothing, but Bill didn't seem to expect an answer.

"So you saw the green light," Bill prompted leadingly, "and before that?"

Harry hesitated.

"Cho?" Bill suggested delicately, seemingly reading Harry's mind. "She was talking about Cedric being missing from the Tri-Wizard Champions."

Harry conceded a small, miserable nod.

"I don't know if she does it on purpose or not," he said slowly, not meeting Bill's eyes, "but whenever she drops a remark about Cedric, it sends me straight back to the graveyard where I was tortured."

Frank hissed sharply; Bill wasn't looking much happier.

"She has to stop doing that, Harry," Bill said firmly.

"I know," Harry agreed tiredly, "it's not — I dunno — I know it's not good for me." When Bill made no further comment, Harry voiced a concern of his own. "I suppose everyone thinks I've gone nuts."

Bill smiled slightly. "No, actually, hardly anyone heard you. As I understand it, most of the talk is about how impressed they are with you for lasting more than an hour against Viktor — broken collarbone and all. You won a lot of bets for your friends — losing the Snitch *and* lasting over an hour. Dung's moneybag must be pretty empty right about now. I think just Cho and Fleur heard you, maybe Viktor."

Deeply relieved, Harry remembered Fleur yelling at someone. "Fleur was furious?"

Bill snorted a half-laugh. "You could say that. She gave Cho quite a piece of her mind — in several languages, actually. I think there might have even been some Gobbledygook in there. You know, it's hard for her, too, being reminded of Cedric. Viktor, too, I imagine. And anyway, Fleur's always had quite a soft spot for you."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"You saving Gabrielle in the Second Task," said Bill. "Her whole family thinks you're just the bee's knees."

Harry thought back to how stupid he felt after realising the other hostages in the lake wouldn't have been harmed, that he could've just collected Ron and got back to the judges first. It was all tragically irrelevant now, but he was pleased, nonetheless, to have earned such good friends in Fleur and Viktor. It struck him, yet again, just how much trauma his friends had to deal with by being connected to him.

"I don't know why my friends are so good to me," he said.

"Don't you?" Bill said, cocking his head to one side.

Harry shrugged slightly and started to sit up, but a wave of nausea came over him.

"Easy there," said Bill.

Bill helped him off the bed and towards the bathroom. Frank, hissing anxious instructions, slithered down from the rafters to follow. Then Cho appeared from nowhere. Harry only just made it to the toilet before throwing up.

"I'll get Madam Pomfrey!" she cried.

"No!" said Harry, coughing and sputtering. "No. I'm fine — fine!"

"Cho," Bill said firmly, "give us a minute, would you?"

"Of course," Cho said worriedly and retreated.

Behind the closed the bathroom door, Harry slumped over the side of the toilet bowl, the porcelain blessedly cool against his hot face. Then he realised, to his great chagrin, that he hadn't actually made it completely into the bowl. Bill cleaned everything up, including his boots, and had Harry drink a good deal of water.

"Your colour's looking better," Bill noted appraisingly. "Look, dinner's not for an hour; just rest easy for a bit, okay?" The Curse-Breaker tipped his head towards the bathroom door and added in a whisper, "Do you want me to get rid of Cho for you?"

"Bless you!" Frank hissed gratefully.

Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"No, it's okay. I'll be out in a few minutes. Thanks, Bill, I really appreciate you —" Harry shrugged awkwardly, "— you know, talking and stuff. It really helps."

"What are big brothers for?" Bill said easily. "Take care of yourself — okay?"

When Harry emerged from the bathroom, Cho jumped forward from her wingchair.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Betrayed, violated, defiled!"

"Cut it out, Frank," said Harry. He locked his snake in the bathroom before answering Cho. "Bit sore," he admitted, feeling awkward, now, as he perched bare-chested on the armrest of a wingchair. "Madam Pomfrey fixed the broken bones."

Cho held up a tube of anti-inflammatory cream as a peace-offering. Armed with The Bludger's Friend, she stood beside Harry and silently massaged the cream into his badly bruised shoulder. The silence between them thickened. Harry had just decided that being with Cho Chang really wasn't worth all the drama when a rush of apologies came spilling from her lips. Harry was startled by how upset she was.

"What did Fleur say to you?" he asked, bewildered.

A fragile smile quivered on the girl's lips. "A lot. I only understood half of it, but it was enough. She said you'd been tortured enough. She said you didn't need to keep reliving one of the worst nights of your life."

Harry thought that pretty much covered it.

"Fleur said —" Cho started then faltered. "I didn't realise you've been having nightmares, too. You always seem so ..."

Cho's voice trailed off and she started blinking a lot. Harry really wasn't up for tears right now, but her apology seemed genuine.

"Look," he said evenly, "the night Cedric died — that night in the graveyard. I lost everything, Cho. I lost my future."

"And I keep taking you back there," Cho conceded miserably.

"It's got to stop," he pleaded.

"It will, Harry," she said resolutely, standing taller somehow. "You've got to believe me!"

Harry was just really tired of talking about it. "Look, I can handle it from anyone else but not from you — not from you. Okay?"

"Never, I promise," she whispered earnestly. "Never."

Already weakening, Harry's resolve to break up with the girl was dealt a fatal blow when her fingertips grazed his bare stomach, making him shiver. He tugged her into his chest and they were still kissing, slowly and deeply, when Remus tapped on the door and entered the room. The teens broke apart, swiping at their lips. Blushing, Cho quickly resumed massaging The Bludger's Friend into Harry's shoulder. Remus merely arched an eyebrow to the lad over the girl's head.

"Good to see you're feeling better, Harry," he offered pleasantly. "Cream helping?"

Harry nodded sheepishly, gratified that a quiet look between them was sufficient chastisement for being caught snogging Cho in his bedroom again. However pleasant Remus was being, Harry knew he wasn't about to leave them alone.

"I saw you and Harry down in Diagon Alley the other day," Remus offered conversationally to Cho, as she worked on Harry's shoulder. "Looked like you were having fun emptying the shops," he teased. He cast a disapproving eye towards his ward. "Though, I would've thought my boy here could've held your bags for you."

Cho rolled her eyes. "I'm afraid Harry was holding someone else's bags that day."

Harry snorted appreciatively. With his foot firmly stuck in his mouth, Remus Lupin wisely elected to shut up.

"All done," Cho said a few moments later then gave Harry a chaste peck on the cheek. "Try to rest, okay?"

Smiling urbanely, Remus escorted her from the room.

"I'll check in on you later, Harry," he called over his shoulder.

Of that, Harry had no doubt.

"Tell me you're done with that woman!" Frank demanded the minute Harry reopened the bathroom door.

"It's complicated, Frank," Harry said. "She's been through a lot."

Frank sniffed disdainfully and Harry conceded a future with Cho might not really be such a great idea. Frank gasped in delight then clamped his mouth shut, seemingly not wanting to press his luck too far. Relaxing in the shower, Harry's mind turned over the quandary that was Cho Chang. Was all the angst really worth it? The question was somewhat forgotten when his thoughts turned to contemplating that his bathtub really was big enough for two.

Remus returned to check on him as Harry was dressing for the feast. Proving himself a dab hand with a needle, Remus had already resized Harry's old dress robes for him, and they now fit fairly well on his two-years-older frame.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Harry complained, holding up a cream cravat Fleur gave him for his birthday.

Remus chuckled. He loosely tied the cravat and used Sirius's ruby pin to hold it in place. As before, when Harry closed his fingers around the ruby, affectionate feelings washed over him and an image of his father's face flashed before his mind, his hazel eyes twinkling. Remus stood back to admire his handiwork.

"You look very dapper," he said approvingly.

They were halfway down to the ground floor when Remus nudged his boy in the side to look up. Harry's breath caught in his throat as he watched a vision in red descending. Cho's shiny black hair perfectly framed her creamy skin, her dark eyes, her blood-red lips ... Cho smiled shyly at him, and the lad swallowed, trying to remember ... something ... what was it he was supposed to remember?

Oh yeah, Cho — bad ... very bad ...

Slipping into the dining room with Cho on his arm, Harry marvelled again at the mysteries of Wizard Space. The room had somehow swelled in proportions and now sat eighty people where the usual capacity was only twenty. The room was beautifully lit with hundreds of scented candles, and there was a definite Fleur-ish feel with real roses and ivy climbing all over the walls. Beneath the portrait of Sirius' great-grandfather, Hestia Jones was busy helping a group of tuxedo-clad chamber musicians climb from the music-box's brass horn. Harry's friends were concentrated at either end of the long table, whilst the more senior guests were clustered in the centre. Harry spied a spare seat between Padma Patil and Gwenog Jones. It occurred to him that getting a bit of space between him and Cho might not be such a bad idea; he never seemed to think too clearly when she was near. And it'd give him a chance to talk to his other friends.

"You want to be quick," he suggested, pointing out the seat to Cho. Cho eyed it longingly. "You can sit next to me any time. Go on, shoo."

Cho gave him a kiss on the lips before racing away. Dedalus Diggle caught Harry's eye and raised his glass in salute, making wiping signs across his lips. Harry blushed and headed down the opposite end of the table, wiping Cho's lipstick off on his sleeve along the way. He found a seat opposite Ron and Parvati and between Susan and Hannah. The girls all beamed at him. Parvati immediately stretched across and pulled his wrist towards her to check his mood. The stone was blue with a few fading streaks of red.

"Oooh, new colours!" Parvati cooed happily. "How do you feel?"

Harry shrugged. Parvati took this as an invitation to launch into a lengthy analysis of all the latest party gossip. Ron was busy gazing longingly at the platters of food, anxiously awaiting the signal to launch an attack on the roast lamb someone foolishly placed right in front of him. Parvati started talking about Divination and invited Ron's opinion of Geomancy.

Ron shrugged. "Just a lot of throwing dirt around, if you ask me."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Parvati enthused, leaning closer to him, "now *entrails* I can get into but dirt? No, thank you!" She proceeded to expound at length on gallstones and livers and seemed to take the dreamy look in Ron's eyes as an indication of sharing her passion. Harry suspected Ron was actually picturing livers sautéed with onions and served with a nice red-wine sauce.

"Do you really inspect intestines and such in Divination?" Susan asked Harry, wincing at the idea.

"I expect *they* will," Harry replied, nodding towards Parvati and Ron. "I managed to fail," he confided in a low but decidedly cheerful, tone, "so I finally get to drop it."

"Will you pick up something else?" asked Susan.

"Like what?" Harry asked; he didn't know you could pick up new subjects in sixth year.

"Oh, there's a whole range of electives you can do if you don't want to take all NEWT classes," Susan said happily. She leaned in a little and whispered, "The electives tend to be somewhat easier than NEWT subjects."

"Yeah?" Harry said interestedly; Hermione never mentioned non-NEWT subjects. "Such as?"

A bell tinkled and conversation around the long table stilled. After bowing to his guests, Remus offered a simple, yet sincere, welcome and invited them to commence eating. A happy commotion ensued as people piled their plates high.

"So, what kind of electives are there?" Harry asked Susan.

"Oh, there are so many!" she said. "There are extra branches of magical fungi and herbs, and ... Ah ... there's one, I forget what it's called, you do setting up magical protection zones, you know, like they did for the Quidditch World Cup. Then there's magical first-aid, magical languages — although if you do Care of Magical Creatures at NEWT level, then you do already cover some of that material, though not in as much depth."

"Do they teach Parseltongue?" asked Harry.

"Going for an easy NEWT, are we?" said Susan teasingly. "I've never heard of it being taught. I guess you have to be born with it — like you were."

"Actually, I probably got it after I was born," admitted Harry. Dumbledore seemed to think he'd accidentally acquired the power from Voldemort when he was cursed.

"Really?" said Susan curiously. "When did you know?"

"When I was ten," replied Harry. Leaning closer, he confided he'd accidentally set a Brazilian Boa Constrictor on his cousin.

"You didn't!" Susan whispered back, delighted. "Was he okay?"

"Oh yeah, the snake was fine," Harry assured her, and Susan laughed.

Harry smiled back at her. Tonight the girl's hair was out of its usual long plait and fell in curls down her back, held off her face with small gold bands. The colour of her hair seemed to change a bit when she moved — between dark-red and gold, like the flickering candlelight around them. Susan had very clear hazel eyes, regular features, and full pink lips that went rather twisted when she was thinking. Harry thought she was quite pretty, really. She wasn't a drop-dead knockout like Cho or the Patil twins, just a normal, nice-looking girl, but she seemed to light up somehow when she smiled.

"You look very pretty tonight," Harry said politely. "I like your hair out like that," he added, waving his hand a bit, "and the gold bits."

Susan's cheeks pinked and she smiled shyly into her goblet.

"Thank you very much. Lavender did it for me."

Harry just smiled back at her; it occurred to him that paying girls compliments seemed to be getting both easier and more productive.

"Anyway," she continued, reaching for a piece of crackling, "they teach Mermish and a few other languages. But it really depends on which teachers the school can find to provide instruction. I'm just praying they can find a Light Arts teacher this year; Professor Dumbledore said they might have one lined up; they haven't offered that subject in years."

"What's Light Arts?" Harry asked, imagining something like Cheering Charms.

"Oh, it's just the most *amazing* subject," Susan gushed, waving her crackling in the air, "they teach magic in art, music, sculpture ..."

"Yeah?" Harry said musingly. "I wouldn't mind doing something like that."

"Oh, you absolutely should! Your drawings are just beautiful!"

Harry listened contentedly as Susan launched into an enthusiastic description of the course curriculum for Light Arts. He became oddly distracted by the way a stray curl of her hair kept bouncing against her cheek. He found himself itching to reach out and tug the curl just to see if it was a soft as it looked.

"... so then they had to rebuild the whole thing," Susan explained with a resigned shrug.

"Sorry?" asked Harry, having lost track of the conversation. "Oh, right."

"Are you *still* going on about Light Arts?" Justin said, from the other side of Susan. "She won't shut up about it," he said, throwing Harry a sympathetic grin.

Susan glared at Justin then laughed. "Well, it's exciting. There's so much to learn!"

Justin slung his arm casually around Susan's chair and whispered something in her ear. They both laughed and Susan shook her head and pushed him away. Not wanting to intrude, Harry turned his attention to Hannah's side. The conversation bubbled over with the usual well-travelled subjects of Quidditch, school gossip, music, summer concerts, and such, but Harry went a bit quiet; he couldn't stop thinking about Sirius. How dearly Harry wished he could be here with them. After awhile, Harry caught Susan watching him push his food around his plate.

"You don't seem to be very hungry tonight," she remarked.

Harry made an effort to smile.

"Just saving some leftovers for Frank. I'm gonna need to break it to him that I can't take him to school."

Harry explained his two-pet dilemma to Susan, and she added a choice piece of crackling to Frank's treat. She looked as if she wanted to say something but wasn't sure how.

"What?" Harry prompted curiously.

"Well, it's just ..." she started, "well, I mean — if you want — I could take him for you." Harry looked at Susan in surprise and she quickly backtracked. "Of course, you probably don't want —"

"No," Harry said at once, "that would be *brilliant*, but are you sure you'd want to do that? Haven't you got a pet already?"

"Sort of," Susan admitted. She sneaked a glance towards the power players in the middle of the table and continued in a whisper, "When I started at Hogwarts, my auntie gave me a toad." Susan rolled her eyes at the look of glee on Harry's face. "Don't even go there," she warned him. "Anyway, I'd *much* rather have Frank's company than Gilderoy's."

Harry burst out laughing. On seeing the look of mortification on Susan's face, he waved his hands in apology and said, "No, sorry — sorry, truly." Then a grin sneaked back onto his face. "But come on — seriously — *Gilderoy*?"

Susan looked rather pretty when she blushed, and Harry had to push down the urge to think of something else to say to make her go all pink-cheeked again.

"Right," he said, "well, if you could take Frank, that'd be fantastic for *me* . Of course, I'd take care of his food and all, but are you *sure* you wouldn't mind? It's a big imposition."

"Not at all," Susan assured him. "But do you think Frank would mind?"

"Frank?" said Harry. "Are you kidding? He's *totally* in love with you! He's been singing your praises all weekend!"

Susan laughed at that.

"What is it about me?" she said, shaking her head. "I attract snakes and toads. I swear I'm going to die an old maid surrounded by reptiles. I'll be the snake lady of Hogsmeade and live in the Shrieking Shack and frighten away small children."

Harry nodded solemnly. "Always good to have a plan."

Susan smiled into her goblet of peach nectar.

"So, what's your plan, Harry?" she said.

"Ah — well," said Harry, "see, I thought I'd raise werewolf cubs. *Huge* growth industry. I'll raise them and farm them out to be guardians for orphans. Seriously, they *absolutely* make *the* best guardians. But I'd need the Shrieking Shack, so we might have to share."

Susan nodded approvingly. "I'm sure we could come to a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Hannah gasped fearfully.

"Is that wise?" she said. "Wouldn't that be very dangerous?"

Susan gazed fondly at her blue-eyed, blonde friend.

"We'll be very careful," she said, reaching across Harry to pat Hannah's hand. "Won't we, Harry?"

"Oh, absolutely," Harry assured her.

"Oooh, you've gone green!" Susan said curiously, noticing Harry's moodstone. "Is that good or bad?"

"Good," Harry declared firmly.

Parvati's ears picked up and she stretched across the table to inspect the moodstone.

"I cannot *believe* this thing has picked your moods so fast!" she said. "It's only been three days; it usually takes months!"

"He's only got two moods," sniggered Ron, "pissed and more pissed."

"How's Bruce doing, Ron?" Harry asked sweetly. "Launched any more *hives* lately?"

"Was that *your* doing?" Parvati asked Ron, sounding appalled — but also a little impressed.

Ron puffed up a little, but his reply was interrupted by the tinkling of the dinner bell. Wands came out all over the table and dirty dishes and platters began to disappear. Harry quickly grabbed Frank's treat as the table tidied itself in preparation for the dessert course. Arthur Weasley rose, and Hestia waved to the musicians to stop playing. The musicians looked rather miffed and collected sulkily in a corner of the room, glowering. Sitting through birthday toasts from the members, Harry did his obligatory smiles and nods in all the right places. Then it was Remus's turn.

"Good evening again," Remus said when the room quieted down. "With your indulgence, Harry and I would like to make a special toast this evening to someone who was very important to both of us. I am, of course, speaking of our dear friend Sirius Black."

All around the room, sympathetic faces turned towards Remus and Harry, including the DA members, who'd discovered only recently the truth about Sirius Black.

"I met Sirius as a schoolboy, as many new friends do, on the Hogwarts Express." Remus looked fondly down the table to Harry. "Even at eleven years old anyone could've told you he was a danger to any shred of dignity you might hold dear. By the end of that first train ride I learned more about hexes than ... well ... anyway, you can just imagine things got even *more* disconcerting when James Potter and Sirius Black joined forces." Melancholic smiles drifted around the table as Remus toyed sadly with his goblet. "Quite simply, that devilish duo made my life worth surviving. Sirius was the truest of friends, and I miss him dearly."

"I shan't speak of the tragedy of Sirius's false imprisonment," continued Remus, his voice growing even more hoarse than usual, "nor of a life less lived. I should prefer to tell you of the joy he felt when he found his boy again. I know Harry felt the same way about his godfather; they truly belonged to each other; when one was in peril, nothing could long keep the other from his side."

Harry's throat tightened. He reflexively fingered Sirius's ruby cravat pin and felt a surge of warmth and comfort. Remus smiled sadly and

motioned for Harry to rise. Harry stood tall and proud, lifting his goblet as Remus made the toast in a voice thick with emotion.

"He whom the gods love, dies young. Rest in peace, Sirius."

All the guests rose and joined in repeating the toast. Harry looked around, heartened to see everyone standing up for Sirius. The musicians formed a brief huddle then a pianist emerged and played a haunting movement from Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Conversation resumed, quietly at first, then rose to a steady hum. Susan placed a comforting hand on Harry's arm.

"Are you okay," she said in a voice only he could hear.

Harry looked down at the girl's hand, at her long slim fingers, so gentle on the piano, and offered the slightest of nods. Susan gave his arm a warm squeeze before pulling her hand away and changing the topic.

"I hope you don't mind, Harry," she said lightly, "but I've been using your piano every chance I can get this weekend."

"Really?" Harry said. "Of course, you're very welcome to. Do you not have one at home?"

Susan shook her head. "I go to my Great-Great Aunt Esmerelda's to play."

Harry grimaced sympathetically. "Let me guess: cats and doilies?"

Susan laughed a little. "And stale biscuits — yeah."

Harry was just about to offer his own piano for her to practice on during the holidays, rather liking the idea of having someone playing it, but their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of dozens of incoming friendlies. Molly Weasley and a few helpers floated the desserts into the room and set them gently circulating a foot above the table. Before Harry could take a bite of his treacle tart, he noticed Professor Dumbledore rising to his feet. The boy groaned inwardly. With no chance of escape, he forced a polite expression onto his face and waited resignedly for his punishment for having been born.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore had style; no one could deny that. Resplendent in magnificently embroidered robes of gold and blue, his speech was similarly embroidered with fine compliments for the Boy-Who-Lived, but then his words grew less flowery, his tone more confidential.

"I knew when Harry was cursed," revealed Dumbledore, "he would be forever marked by a most cruel fate ... that he would be called upon to play a crucial role in creating a more lasting peace for his generation. Time and again he has proved me right in thinking him capable of carrying the heaviest of burdens, and yet I resisted arming him adequately, foolishly believing my reticence was doing him a kindness."

Whispers sped around the room, with many of the senior members of the Order glancing apprehensively towards the teens at each end of the table. A muscle twitched in Harry's cheek as he was reminded of the information withheld from him. He knew that any one of the members could have warned him off. Any one of them, even Mrs Weasley, could have warned him he might be tricked into going to the Ministry. Even if they didn't know what was *inside* the prophecy, they all knew it was about him and that Voldemort wanted it at all costs.

Dumbledore paused a moment then said, "The time draws near when fate may call upon Harry Potter again."

A stunned silence fell over the room, even Ron had stopped eating. Then all pretence at whispering fell away, and a shocked buzz raced around the table. Harry avoided looking at his friends, but he couldn't help but hear the urgency in their voices ... or their fear. Instead, he glared furiously at Dumbledore, but the Headmaster returned his gaze calmly. Remus's eyes darted worriedly between his leader and his ward; apparently, Dumbledore choosing to drop this little bombshell about Harry's destiny was news to *him* as well.

"But that time has not yet come," Dumbledore declared decisively.

At the sound of his voice, the room grew deathly still again, the only movement being the slow parade of half-eaten desserts. Dumbledore's eyes softened and a rare note of pain crept into his voice.

"I must prevail upon Harry to trust where trust is not deserved, to forgive an old man for allowing the end to justify the means, and to let justice be done though the very heavens fall. Until then, I must entreat his friends, celebrating with him here tonight, to protect him, to cherish him, to aid him on his path."

Dumbledore scanned the room over his half-moon glasses, looking in particular at each of the younger guests.

"A future for our children that is free from war," he concluded slowly, suddenly looking every day of his venerable age, "the cost will be high, but it is possible."

Resentment swelled in Harry's chest; the cost being yours truly, he thought darkly.

Dumbledore raised his goblet. Harry's gaze fixed upon the fat ruby ring on the man's signet finger — the way glinted and shone in the candlelight, so full of power and majesty. Dumbledore motioned for the table to rise. Chairs scraped backwards and silverware tinkled as all the guests raised their goblets.

"*Omnia vincit amor!*" Dumbledore declared.

The whole room repeated the toast whilst Harry sat perfectly still, staring fixedly at his goblet, watching flames dance on its glimmering surface.

Well, there it is, he thought jadedly. The old man may as well have just shown them the prophecy and be done with it. And what did that toast even mean: Love conquers all? How were a few old sayings going to help him bring Voldemort down?

“I need to feed Frank,” he mumbled.

With a swish of green robes, he was on his feet, too, and striding from the room. He was two floors away when he heard feet pounding up the stairs behind him.

“Harry! Hold up!” called Ron.

Close behind, Hermione grunted in frustration as she tripped on her purple gown. She hitched it up to her knees so she could race to catch up. Harry waited for them on the third-floor landing.

“Look, I’m fine,” he said, “I’m just going to feed Frank.”

“And then?” Hermione puffed. “Off to hide in the attic?”

Harry scowled in annoyance. That was pretty much *exactly* what he had in mind.

“Look, just go finish your dinners,” he urged them.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look.

“Nah,” they said in unison.

They each grabbed an elbow and half-pushed — half-pulled Harry the rest of the way to his bedroom, where he slumped into a wingchair and placed Frank’s dinner on the floor next to him.

“Over here, Frank,” he hissed in Parseltongue.

Frank slithered over. “Thanks,” he hissed happily.

“So ...” Ron started uncomfortably, looking to Hermione for guidance.

“Harry,” Hermione started hesitantly, sitting next to him, “what exactly did Professor Dumbledore mean about fate calling on you again?”

This was it. This was the moment Harry had been dreading.

“You remember that prophecy that was smashed, the one with my name on it?”

He waited for their nods.

“Yeah, well, I know what was in it.”

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 11 – Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon

Harry wouldn't have blamed his best friends if they wanted to run a mile after hearing his prophecy, but they didn't. Whilst the Order of the Phoenix members and guests continued feasting in his honour downstairs, Harry was cloistered with Ron and Hermione in Sirius Black's old bedroom, a bedroom made vacant by that cursed prophecy — and Lord Voldemort's obsession with it. Ron leaned both hands against the mantelpiece, his head bowed, his shoulder blades hunched.

"So that's why he wants you dead," he told the hearth. "He knows you can take him."

"Yeah, well, *that* and he's just really pissed at me by now," Harry said from his wingchair.

To his left, a bitter laugh escaped Hermione's trembling lips. "How can you joke about this?"

"You gotta laugh," he apologised, jiggling his knees. "I need to laugh; I think I'd go mad otherwise."

"So, that's what Dumbledore was going on about?" Ron said, facing him squarely. "What did he say? You're supposed to play ..."

"... a crucial role in creating a more lasting peace for his generation," Hermione finished miserably. "You're supposed to kill him. The prophecy says you have the power to defeat him."

"Doesn't mean I *will* beat him," Harry said carefully, "just that it's *possible*."

"That's what Dumbledore said," she said, her voice tightening, "the cost will be high, but it *is* possible. But, Harry, Professor Dumbledore only told you about the prophecy after the battle. He could've warned you — he could have put you on guard. Sirius needn't have —"

Hermione broke off, her eyes sparkling.

"He said he should've told me years ago," Harry confided, "but he didn't want to burden me with knowledge of the prophecy. Said he cared about me too much."

A thick silence fell over the three friends.

"Talk about tough love," Ron said suddenly.

Harry snorted a laugh. Hermione frowned deeply at Ron, but he shook his head at her before turning back to Harry.

"I mean, seriously, the man's barking. He's just gonna just *love* you to death."

Harry chuckled appreciatively.

"You know what your problem is," Ron continued conversationally, "you *really* need to stop being so damn lovable."

Harry burst out laughing. Hermione finally surrendered but didn't seem to know whether she wanted to laugh or cry, so she did both.

"Seriously, you've got this whole lost-puppy thing going on," Ron said, shaking his head sadly. "We *really* need to toughen you up a bit." Hermione was choking now. "Now seriously," Ron continued sternly over the laughter and tears, "when was the last time you hexed anyone?"

Harry loved the way Ron's mind worked.

"Been a while," he said, a mischievous glint forming in his eye. "But they need me, don't they? What are they really gonna do to me?"

Hermione was appalled. "Harry James Potter, you *cannot* be serious! You absolutely *cannot* do any more underage magic!"

"Easy there, Hermy," Harry said, feeling somehow lighter all of a sudden. "Who said anything about performing magic? Don't you reckon we deserve a little payback on the powers-that-be? You two got injured that night as well." Harry kicked at Ron with his foot. "Second bottom drawer."

Grinning madly, Ron retrieved a large package. Hermione, noticing the label, regarded it with the deepest suspicion.

"That's from Fred and George's shop!" she squeaked.

Harry winked at Ron. "Remus always said she was the cleverest witch of her age."

Ron ripped open the packages, his eyes lighting up at the joke-shop booty spilling across the table.

"Harry, you wouldn't!" gasped Hermione. "You couldn't ..."

Harry really could.

The second part of their mission accomplished (the first being to convince Hermione), the threesome hurried back to the feast only to halt halfway

down the stairs.

"Been helping out in the kitchen, I see," growled Mad-Eye Moody.

The giddy feelings Harry had felt just moments earlier evaporated. Mad-Eye crooked a finger to them. The teens plodded down the rest of the steps and were led well away from Mrs Black. To the boys' dismay, Hermione immediately blurted the details of the prank. Ron gave her his filthiest look, but Hermione hissed back that there was no point pretending if the professor already knew. Mad-Eye spun a penetrating eye over each forlorn face then poked his wand towards a pocket of Harry's green robes.

"That the antidote?" he said.

Harry nodded resignedly and handed over the bottle. Mad-Eye's mangled face screwed up in concentration as he carefully examined the label. His crooked lips twitched.

"Don't suppose you'll mind too much if I hang onto this," he said, pocketing the antidote. Hermione gasped and the boys' eyes lit up. Mad-Eye scowled at the lot of them. "Have I taught you *nothing* about stealth! You'll want to wipe those smiles off before you go back in there." Mad-Eye shook his head again. "Teenagers," he grunted, limping away.

Hermione dashed after him.

"Thank you, Professor," she whispered and planted a kiss on the man's leathery cheek.

Mad-Eye chuckled then groaned as he stumped wearily up the stairs.

"Eighty of them," he muttered under his breath. "I'm getting too old for this."

The trio conjured poker faces and slipped back into the noisy dining room. All eyes turned on Harry then just as quickly turned away again in order to avoid being caught staring. Harry offered a half-smile to Remus then headed towards Cho.

"Hey," he whispered, crouching by her seat.

"Hey, yourself," she whispered back, swivelling around in her chair, a sheet of her hair swinging. "Are you okay?"

"Course," Harry said, smiling at a tempting whiff of sandalwood.

Cho started to ask another question but was interrupted by the sharp cracks of Kingsley and Tonks Apparating into the room. They made a beeline for the powers-that-be. Lengthy whispers and a few perplexed shrugs were exchanged between Madam Bones and her Aurors then they returned to their seats. Kingsley glanced Harry's way then diverted his gaze.

"What's all that about?" Harry asked Cho.

"Kingsley got an owl just after you left the room," said Cho, "then he and Tonks went off together."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Well, whatever it was, they didn't seem too concerned about it, unlike Cho, whose brow was creased.

"Harry," she whispered worriedly, "what Dumbledore said about fate calling on you again — what did he mean? Is something going to happen?"

Harry gazed into her dark eyes ... her lips so close ...

"It's nothing, nothing," he said, giving himself a shake. "He just ... look, it's nothing for you to worry about. I'm just going to go finish my dessert." He drew closer, kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear, "I wouldn't drink the tea or coffee."

Cho's eyes widened and a slow smile grew on her face. Harry winked at her and gave her another kiss. By the time he sat back down to his dessert, twelve steaming pots were doing the rounds of the table. Butterflies began to flap about in his stomach. He looked down the long, romantically decorated room and at his guests, elegantly robed in their finest velvet and silk gowns, their faces glowing under the flickering candlelight. He'd never pranked on this scale before — and never teachers.

"Coffee?" Parvati offered Harry.

Harry smiled and held out his cup. "Why not?"

Mad-Eye Moody returned carrying his own coffee cup. Well known for his paranoia, getting his own beverage failed to arouse any curiosity whatsoever amongst the guests. Sipping at his own coffee, Harry couldn't tell if his racing pulse and twitchy feet had more to do with the caffeine, the potion, or just sheer adrenaline. Already nervous, a tap on his shoulder nearly sent coffee spilling over his barely touched tart.

"Oh, sorry, sorry," he muttered to Susan

Susan just smiled and tipped her head towards the power players.

"Remus wants you," she whispered.

Remus was frowning deeply and nodding at something Mad-Eye was saying. The butterflies in Harry's stomach transfigured into bats. Had

Mad-Eye spilled the beans after all? Remus, coffee cup in hand, met Harry halfway around the room and led him out the door and into the library. Harry eyed Remus's cup anxiously. It was just a prank, after all — not even a particularly mean one.

"Everything okay, Harry?" Remus asked. He took a small sip of his coffee and added, "I know the Headmaster's speech must have thrown you."

"Er ... right," Harry said, feeling both relieved and guilty, "er ... sorry, I didn't mean to ... erm ... sorry ..."

"I know it's hard, son," Remus said, "but I'm grateful you have such good friends in Ron and Hermione. True friends are a treasure beyond price."

Feeling even worse, Harry nodded mutely to his feet.

"Harry, I don't want to alarm you," Remus started hesitantly, "but something odd happened over at Privet Drive. It seems Apparition activity was detected in the nearby streets."

"What?" Harry blurted. "Who? *Death Eaters*? Did they attack anyone? Is my aunt okay? Is Dudley?"

"Harry, hold on," said Remus. "We don't know it was Death Eaters — and as far as we know nothing actually happened. Tonks and Kingsley checked on your family. Your aunt was none too pleased to see them — grew rather hysterical, apparently — but nothing seemed out of order. The Ministry charms monitoring your house showed nothing amiss."

Harry's head was still spinning. "What about Snape? Shouldn't he know if Death Eaters are on the move?"

Remus hesitated. Harry rolled his eyes.

"I know he's spying for us," he said impatiently.

Remus conceded that Snape *had* been accepted back into the Dark Order, but his access to sensitive information was being carefully limited by Voldemort; he still wasn't sure about him. Who was, thought Harry. He could feel the ground shifting beneath him.

"So that's it?" he said. "Death Eaters just popped in then popped back out again?"

"Actually, it gets odder," Remus admitted. "It looks like there may have been a Splinching — and Tonks said something about forensic evidence."

Harry's mind was already racing off on its own, filling in the details. White-masked cowards. He could see them now, sneaking down the drive, round the back of the house, peering in the windows ...

"They saw I wasn't there," he guessed.

"That does seem the likeliest scenario," Remus agreed. "Mad-Eye says he's planning to install additional safety measures for you here, and Madam Bones has assigned patrols to safeguard your family — just as a precaution."

Harry nodded distractedly, his chest tightening. It was starting up again. He rubbed at his dormant scar, as if a genie lurked inside, waiting to pop out and give him three curses.

"I thought I'd know if he ..." he started despondently.

Remus set down his coffee and took Harry firmly by both shoulders.

"You're safe here, Harry," he said earnestly.

Harry felt a rush of gratitude for his new guardian. If Remus hadn't rescued him from the dubious sanctuary of Privet Drive, he might well be dead right now. Him and everyone else. As much as Harry didn't care for his family, he hardly wanted them dead. Remus was still firmly gripping his shoulders.

"Believe me, son," he said in his gravelly voice, "I am *not* going to let anything happen to you — not on my watch."

Harry's gaze fell on the man's spiked drink and real remorse swept over him.

"I know that ..." he said dejectedly, "I'm sorry ... I just — I just wanted tonight to be ... I dunno: fun, I guess ... normal, you know?"

Following Harry's gaze, Remus picked up his coffee cup and took another sip.

"Well, the night's not over yet, now is it?" he said, just a hint of a twinkle in his eye. "I must admit I'm rather curious about what I'm drinking right now." Remus chuckled at his ward's tortured facial expressions. "Harry, Harry, I may not be very good at making them, but I can *smell* potion ingredients a mile off. Mad-Eye tells me it's not debilitating and that there's an antidote readily available in need. He seemed to think the members could use a little reminder about the importance of constant vigilance."

Harry stammered an apology, but Remus shushed him and draped an affectionate arm around his shoulders.

"Come on," he said, leading him back towards the dining room, "let's go see just what damage you fledgling Marauders have wrought."

"What did Remus say?" Ron hissed across the table after Harry resumed his seat.

"Just Death Eater stuff," mumbled Harry.

"Oh," Ron said with relief, "that's all right then ..."

"What?" Parvati squeaked.

Hannah's eyes were huge. Terry Boot, at a diagonal from Harry, was all ears.

"It's nothing," Harry said to his friends, trying to sound casual. "It's just — it looks like Death Eaters have been sniffing around my old house."

"The Death Eaters are in Azkaban!" declared Zacharias Smith, a few seats down.

"Not all of them," Terry said, his eyes glittering with interest.

"No, not all of them," Neville agreed grimly.

"Is your family okay?" Susan asked Harry.

"Yeah, they're fine. Look, it's nothing for you guys to worry about. It's nowhere near here."

"But you know something," Terry insisted. "It's *him*, isn't it? He's up to something, isn't he?"

"No idea," Harry said shortly.

"And that nightmare you had?" Terry persisted. "Still got nothing to do with anything, I suppose?"

Harry winced into his coffee, regretting again how everyone knew he'd been screaming in his sleep — especially the girls.

"So, Terry," Susan said firmly, glaring at the Ravenclaw, "you were saying? You know — about that Harpies' game next weekend?"

Terry glanced around for support but found only stony-faced Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs glaring back at him. His lips twisted in frustration, but he backed down and returned reluctantly to the subject of the Noble Sport of Warlocks. Soon, the conversation was flowing easily again, and Harry turned his attention to sneaking looks at the members. His pulse quickened when he spotted the potion taking effect.

Ears and noses were the first to alter in size and shape. Many of the members had been drinking since mid-afternoon and they didn't seem to notice these small changes straight away. But then hair began to change in length and colour, and startled gasps and laughs erupted around the room, building to an uproar of nervous commotion as wands conjured mirrors and the guests tried to see what was happening to themselves and to their neighbours.

All along the table, faces unwrinkled, as if ironed smooth, cleavage rose and shoulders broadened then shrank again, beards disappeared in favour of pimples, robes stretched then loosened again. The most elderly witches and wizards examined their hands and poked their plump cheeks with wry bemusement. Harry and his classmates didn't know where to look first.

"Check out Dumbledore!" Terry chortled, jumping from his seat for a better look.

The teenagers gaped gleefully as Dumbledore's silver beard receded into his chin and his hair transformed into a lustrous auburn mane.

"Forget Dumbledore — have a gander at McGonagall!" crowed Dean.

Discarding all pretence at decorum, the DA loosed raucous cheers and wolf whistles. A surprisingly handsome Scottish-maiden blushed, transformed into a cat and disappeared under the table.

"Lost something, Minerva?" boomed the pink-cheeked, square-jawed blonde seated next to her.

"Who's that!" breathed Parvati, yanking at Harry's sleeve.

Harry followed her gaze towards an extremely handsome dark-haired lad trying to tempt Professor McGonagall out from under the table.

"Here, kitty, kitty," chuckled the increasingly young man in a velvety voice. Startled, he grabbed at his throat, a look of wonder and delight lighting up his dark eyes.

Harry laughed with amazement at how different he looked.

"I think that's Elphias Doge," he said, squinting.

Parvati frowned, trying to remember. "The one with the wheezy voice?"

"Not any more!" Harry said happily.

Phineas Nigellus groaned loudly from the edge of his portrait. "Not again! I had quite enough of Dumbledore and Doge the *first* time around!"

"Evening, Headmaster!" young Elphias called merrily over the boisterous crowd.

"We're all doomed!" Phineas Nigellus said before disappearing from view.

Harry tried to spot Remus through the jumble of his classmates, who were now climbing over their seats for a better view. Harry beamed with delight as his prematurely greying guardian transformed, not into a werewolf, but into something much more frightening — a teenager. The young Remus caught Harry's eye and grinned back at him, his eyes dancing with pleasure.

Careful not to tread on his treacle tart, Harry climbed up onto the table and coughed a few times to get the room's attention. He was very relieved to see so many faces smiling warmly at him; even Madam Bones looked amused. Professor McGonagall, however, chose to maintain her Animagus form and was padding agitatedly on her seat, trying to keep her tail out of the reach of Elphias Doge's wandering wand.

"Good evening," Harry called out, and the room quieted in fits and starts in anticipation. "Um ... yeah ..." Harry said, scratching his head sheepishly, "... as you might guess, most of you are now sixteen years old. The potion'll wear off eventually on its own —"

"But there is an antidote available *now* for anyone who wants it," cut in Hermione from the Cho end of the table.

"*Anyway*," Harry said, throwing her a mock glare, "we hoped you might be inclined to see this as an opportunity. Maybe it could help you remember what it's like to be my age." Harry locked eyes with his Headmaster. "I'm told it's difficult: remembering, that is. I thought we might work a bit on that tonight."

Laughter and applause sounded from around the table, especially from the real teens.

"Out of the mouths of babes, Albus," Elphias said, chuckling.

Dumbledore gestured courteously to his head of security. "Alastor?"

"What's fifty more?" Mad-Eye said, shrugging. Without looking, he swatted away a chocolate profiterole that was heading for his left ear.

Dumbledore's lips twitched as he turned to the Ministry's Head of Law Enforcement.

"And what is your opinion, Madam Bones?" he inquired politely.

Young Amelia toyed with the monocle she no longer needed. Peering down the table towards her niece, she raised one eyebrow questioningly. Susan nodded pleadingly. Looking from one Bones girl to the other, Harry felt oddly relieved to see only a passing family resemblance.

"Well, as far as *punishments* go," Madam Bones boomed matter-of-factly, "I've certainly had *worse* things thrown at me!" An annoyed miaow sounded from the chair next to her. "Use your words, Minerva," urged the Ministry official encouragingly. A frustrated hiss was the Professor's only response.

Dumbledore turned back to Harry, a much-missed twinkle in his light-blue eyes.

"I have but one request, Harry," Dumbledore ventured.

Harry nodded and held his breath. He got the feeling he wasn't the only one in the room to be doing so.

"I shall understand if you ... well ... I won't mind if you say no ..." said young Albus, smiling shyly, "but I wonder if there's any chance I might borrow your Firebolt?"

Hanging over the crowded poolroom balcony, the real teens watched in amazement the spectacle before them. Mad-Eye Moody was refereeing a game that could only be described as a battle and very little consequence was being given to the rules (even by Madam Hooch). It was, quite simply, the filthiest game of Quidditch Harry had ever seen. Surely not since the infamous first World Cup in 1473 had there been so many personal fouls. Brooms were set alight, limbs were deliberately Splinched, and clouds of locusts chased the Chasers — and that was just from the referee.

None of the members wanted to miss out, and there were rapid player-substitutions from the balcony, mostly for injuries. Madam Pomfrey had elected to go home, so Cho and Angelina were kept busy providing magical first-aid. Lee made a token attempt at commentary, but the action was too fast, too furious, and he wasn't sure who was who anyway. Instead, he simply set the music box blasting out Weird Sisters' hits over the dark pitch, lit only by the occasional exploding firework. Or that was what he tried to do. The classical musicians refused to get back in the box and a savage battle ensued between them and the grungy Weird Sisters.

Whilst Hestia dealt with the musicians, Harry and his mates were laying bets on the next player to be hexed. Just in time, too, as they spotted Dedalus Diggle trying to enlarge McGonagall's goal rings to give himself a better chance at scoring. The boys roared their approval when Diggle found himself transfigured by Elphias Doge into a giant purple Snidget. Harry took a swig of the Butterbeer Seamus handed him and almost snorted it up his nose. An impish chuckle sounded. The boys crowded down one end of the balcony around Seamus, who revealed a bottle of Vratsa Vodka hidden in his robes.

"What, no Firewhiskey left?" snickered Dean.

"*Fred and George nicked it!*" Seamus hissed indignantly.

"Remus'll smell it," Harry said ruefully.

"Nah, no chance; it's odourless, init," Seamus said happily.

Furtive and giggling, the schoolboys sneaked down to the dark grass far below and sipped curiously at their spiked drinks. Harry didn't think he felt any different as he and the boys cheerfully belted out their favourite Weird Sisters' hits.

"She's got a *tic in her eye* ... She's got a *tic in her eye-ey-ey* ... She's got a *tic in her eye, and she don't care!*"

Perhaps emboldened by Viktor's stolen vodka, it didn't take long for the Ravenclaws to jump on Harry about Dumbledore's speech. Ron was just as quick to shut them down.

"Yeah, he's the Chosen One, haven't you heard? It's his destiny to lead a midget army to world domination from the knees down. He's already started freeing house-elves. Next, it's goblins, then the Leprechauns, then —"

"Actually," Harry cut in, accepting his second bottle from Seamus, "— cheers — gnomes before goblins. I do like keeping things alphabetical."

Harry and Ron, ably aided by Dean, Neville, and a burping Seamus, started vigorously debating the merits of Cornish Pixies over Doxys for Harry's 'Ankle-Biting Battalions'. The Ravenclaws rolled their eyes in surrender. The Hufflepuffs had more important things on their minds.

"What are the girls up to?" Zacharias drawled, flat on his back on the cool grass. Ernie was busy throwing up behind a grandstand.

"Hang on," offered Terry, adjusting something in his ear whilst Justin handed out pretzels and nuts. "Ah ... singing with the band ... sound breathless, like they're dancing, maybe ..."

"How do you —"

"Extendible Ears!" Terry said happily. "Got 'em from Fred and George's shop. They're wicked! Oh, wait ... sounds like Cho's laying into Diggle for trying to cheat ..."

The boys squinted towards the balcony, where they could just make out Cho imperiously ordering the giant Snidget back to the game.

"You don't want to be messin' with Cho," Michael remarked with just a trace of bitterness.

Harry, on his third drink, shot a hard look across the darkness. Ron caught the look.

"Sour grapes, Corner?" snapped the redhead. He'd never been too fond of Michael. Not since he'd dated his sister, anyway.

A distinct chill settled over the group. Harry took a lengthy swig from his drink.

"Not sour, no," Michael said coolly. "It was all going fine — for a while. Just got a bit too possessive for my liking. That and always going on about old boyfriends."

Harry was annoyed but also relieved it wasn't just him getting that kind of rubbish from the girl.

"She's used to getting her own way, that's for sure," Terry said.

"Can we *not* discuss Cho!" Harry snapped testily.

"So, Potter ... have you and Cho ever ..." Zacharias said leeringly.

"Mind out of the gutter, Smith," Harry said icily. "Really none of your business."

The group ducked as one when a red dragon roared past them. A glittering trail of sparkles illuminated the boys' faces for a few moments. Harry glared broodingly at Michael. Michael returned his gaze evenly.

"I get Cedric," Harry muttered finally. "Who did you get?" he asked, thinking Michael would say the same.

Michael reached for a handful of Justin's nuts.

"You," he said coolly.

"Me?" Harry snorted incredulously. "As if *I'd* ever make anyone jealous."

"Oh, let's see," Michael began, counting off on his fingers, "Tri-Wizard Champion, DA leader, star Seeker, need I go on?"

Harry regarded Michael darkly. "Yeah? Try competing with the dead."

"Well, if You-Know-Who has his way," countered Michael smoothly, "that may still happen."

Shocked gasps erupted around the small group. Ron choked on his drink. Neville thumped him hard on the back. Michael tensed, and seemed to be holding his breath, but did not flinch from Harry's gaze. Terry looked nervously between the pair, not noticing his earpiece had fallen out. In a weird way, Harry found Michael's pragmatism refreshing after all the pussyfooting around the subject he usually got from his friends. He drained his drink then tossed aside the empty bottle. His fists free, he idly considered hurling one of them at Corner, but grabbed a fistful of nuts instead.

Michael ducked the nuts and chucked as many back at him. Soon, the whole group was rolling around, wrestling and laughing and dumping anything they could find on each other, oblivious to the mad war being waged far above them. The standard of conversation rapidly degenerated, but Harry felt exhilarated, trading juvenile insults with his mates. It was well after midnight before they realised the Quidditch was over and they'd run out of vodka. Leaving Ernie on the grass to sleep it off, the rest of the boys clambered back up to the poolroom to see Minerva McGonagall glaring in tight-lipped fury at her name on the Wheel of Destruction.

"Come now, Minerva," Fred said encouragingly, swinging his arms wide to include the newcomers worming their way into better vantage spots, "plenty of choices here ..."

The schoolboys dissolved into hysterical giggles at the idea of kissing Professor McGonagall. Elphias Doge was a good deal less impressed.

"She doesn't have to do it, Mr Weasley," he said, a hint of menace in his voice.

Roars of 'No fair!' and 'Suck it up, Professor!' resounded around the room.

"Now that's hardly the spirit, Elphias," Fred tutted airily. "Let's see, Minnie, if you *really* can't decide I suppose we'll just have to ask the Wheel to choose."

Harry and his mates roared their approval and started chanting Dumbledore's name. Young Albus winced apologetically at Minerva, who paled. Fred nodded to his twin, and George drew his wand, but before he could raise it to the Wheel a blur with dark hair crash-tackled him to the ground. Harry was obliged to bury his face in his elbow to stop hiccuping and giggling. George, facedown on the poolroom floor, his arms pinned tightly behind his back, really wasn't having a good weekend.

"Now, Mr Weasley," Elphias said pleasantly, "as I see it, you have three options: I can break your wand, I can break your arm, or ..." Elphias tightened his grip, "... or you can say, *next victim*."

"Wait!" sounded a new voice.

Startled, George and Elphias looked up to see young Minerva in the centre of the room.

"If Mr Doge would be so kind as to oblige?" she invited in a lilting Scottish brogue.

Stunned, Elphias's handsome young face blushed and the room exploded in raucous applause. George took the opportunity to wriggle free, but Elphias had already forgotten all about him. Straightening up, he bowed to Minerva and formally offered her his hand. His lady-fair accepted it and Elphias bowed yet more deeply. His eyes never left her face as he tenderly kissed her fingers. When he arose, he beamed at Minerva then looked around curiously at the still-expectant faces.

"What?" he asked, bewildered. "That was a snog in my day."

The boys booed, the girls giggled. Chuckling, Remus raised his wand to the Wheel and declared, "Mischief managed!"

Most of the members decided to call it a night, and Madam Bones hobbled towards the birthday boy to do the same. On the way, she stopped to pat Susan's cheek and give her an oddly gentle kiss on the forehead.

"Be a good girl now," young Amelia said fondly.

When she turned back to Harry, her more familiar no-nonsense persona was in full evidence.

"Goodnight, young man!" she boomed genially. "Ah, Mr Lupin, good, I wanted to thank you both for a most memorable day."

Remus and Harry exchanged sheepish glances. Madam Bones's leg was in a splint and her youthful face was battered and bruised.

"I'm so sorry you had trouble with that spare broomstick," Remus apologised, casting a suspicious glance towards Harry. "I just can't imagine what happened to it."

"Not at all, not at all," Madam Bones said dismissively. "Rowena managed to un-jinx it eventually. Ah, Rowena, there you are. Ready to go?"

Madam Hooch added her farewells, and Madam Bones prepared her Portkey.

"Minerva?" she called out to her friend.

"Oh," Minerva said, breaking away from Elphias, "you go on," she uttered in a stage whisper. "I'll Floo you tomorrow."

"You'd better!" Madam Bones countered with a salute to Elphias.

Stifling a yawn, Harry limply waved off Madams Bones and Hooch then several other guests.

"You must be exhausted," said Remus, smiling indulgently at his ward. "Why don't you head up to bed?"

"Yeah, soon," yawned Harry.

The teen werewolf leaned closer. "Do I smell something I'd rather not?"

Harry was suddenly wide-awake. So much for vodka being odourless! Stammering an apology, he assured Remus he'd only had the smallest taste — just to see what it was like. Sixteen-year-old Remus Lupin cocked an eyebrow and looked him up and down.

"Well ... if it was just a taste," he said slowly — perhaps disbelievingly, "but no more, okay?"

Harry very quickly agreed. In fact he positively beamed at his guardian. At sixteen, they were about the same height and weight, which heartened Harry enormously.

"I love seeing you short," he declared blissfully.

Remus chuckled and left to join the remaining adults in the drawing room for port. Harry didn't bother asking; he knew he wouldn't be getting any. As the crowd thinned, Harry spotted Cho fast asleep on one of the poolroom couches, completely oblivious to the noise around her.

"How can she do that?" Harry asked Padma, scratching his head in wonder. "Should I wake her?"

"Not if you know what's good for you!" Padma said, laughing.

Harry smiled down at Cho; she was so beautiful asleep. Lying there in her elegant red robes, with her perfect skin and ruby lips, she looked for all the world like Sleeping Beauty. Feeling romantic, and just a wee bit tipsy, Harry bent low to kiss her lovely lips.

Whack!

Muffled voices floated above Harry. Something cold and wet slapped against his face.

"He's coming 'round."

"Give him some air."

"What happened?"

"Cho belted him!" snapped Ron's angry voice.

"I didn't mean to, honestly! It's a reflex thing —" cried Cho.

"I tried to tell him not to wake you!"

Someone was slapping at Harry's face and calling his name. Harry reluctantly opened his eyes to see a blurry black face framed with bouncing coils of hair.

"Megaera?" he said woozily.

"Harry?" The demon was frowning. "It's Angelina!"

Harry gazed dazedly at the fuzzy faces surrounding him, trying to remember how he got on the floor. Then he saw Cho.

"What d'you go and hit me for?" he moaned.

Apologising profusely, Cho helped him to his feet. Accepting an ice pack from someone, Harry touched it gingerly to his right eye.

"I'm going to bed," he muttered crossly.

Cho found his glasses and repaired the cracked right lens.

"Harry, I'm so sorry," she said again as they climbed the stairs. "I didn't mean to hit you, honestly, I didn't!"

Harry just glared at her. He let her kiss his cheek goodnight then fumbled further down the hall only to find the lion-headed door handle to his own bedroom locked. Music and laughter could be heard inside. Well, at least he knew where The Weird Sisters had gone. Disgruntled, he pounded tiredly on the door. There was no response — just a lot of splashing and high-pitched giggling. Leaning his forehead against the door, Harry whimpered for the loss of his wonderful bed. Still holding the ice pack to his eye, he stumbled back downstairs to the drawing room — it had the most comfortable couches — and slipped inside, surprised to find an impromptu musical recital in progress: Elphias Doge singing dopey old ballads to a group of enraptured admirers, including Hermione, Susan, and Hannah, who were all already hogging the sofas. Candlelight illuminated each sofa-thief's face. Elphias had eyes for only one lass, a certain young Transfiguration Mistress, as he sweetly sang, *Do You Not Hear My Lady*. Remus, sitting on the floor against the grandfather clock with his legs outstretched, spotted Harry and beckoned him over.

"What happened to you?" he whispered as Harry crumpled to the floor beside him.

"Don't ask."

"Did you get into a fight?"

"Not exactly."

"Who did this?" Remus insisted, trying to inspect Harry's eye in the dim room. "Who was he?"

Harry's face grew hot. "It wasn't a *he*."

That shut Remus up.

Another song started — something about blackbirds and thrushes. Stretching out, Harry squirmed around, trying to find a more comfortable position on the hard wooden floor.

"I thought you were heading for bed?" Remus whispered.

Harry slapped the now floppy icepack onto his face. "The Weird Sisters are in my bathtub."

Remus burst out laughing then grimaced under the disapproving glares of Elphias's fan club.

"Sorry," he mouthed to them. "That," he whispered to Harry, "has got to be the best excuse I've ever heard of for not going to bed."

Remus reached for the icepack and freshened it with a Freezing Charm. The cold felt wonderful on Harry's swollen face.

"Why don't you go up to my room?" Remus whispered. "You can sleep there."

Harry couldn't face climbing the stairs again.

"Nah, I'm good," he said, giving his bruised shoulder a rub.

Remus just smiled. He beckoned a cushion and slapped it against his legs.

"Here you go," he whispered, patting the pillow, which purred.

Harry didn't need a second invitation. Lying there against Remus's legs, listening to Elphias's dulcet tones, Harry fought to keep his eyes open, but it was a battle he had no chance of winning. He curled onto his good side and felt himself drifting off. Some while later, voices floated through his sleepy daze ... and the sound of a single violin. Harry slowly remembered where he was. The floor creaked as someone sat down beside him.

"How's our young man doing, Remus?" whispered a boy's voice.

Remus chuckled softly. "I think a long day has finally caught up with him, Albus."

Harry felt fingers brush his hair, Remus's fingers. Harry knew he was far too old to like such things — he was practically of age — but lying there on the cold, hard floorboards, his head throbbing and his stomach queasy, he found it difficult to think of any place he'd rather be.

"Molly told me he had a nightmare last night ..." Dumbledore ventured leadingly.

Harry lay still, feigning sleep and listening curiously. Remus said nothing.

"Remus?"

"It wasn't Voldemort," Remus said dismissively.

"What was it about?"

"No idea," Remus said shortly. The pair fell silent for another long moment. "Bill already talked to him," Remus conceded.

"What did he say?"

"I didn't ask."

Silence fell once more. Harry was sorely tempted to peek at the pair, but he was glad he didn't because Dumbledore started up again.

"Remus, I should like to ask Harry if —"

"No," said Remus firmly. "I'll not have him upset over —" Remus broke off and exhaled audibly. "Look, I'm sure he'd tell us if there was anything to tell."

The pair fell silent again. Harry heard doors opening and closing and the sounds of whispered goodbyes.

Dumbledore tried again. "Remus, you must —"

"Must what?" Remus whispered aggressively, his hand now resting in a proprietary way on Harry's shoulder. "The boy deserves some privacy. He's not some lab rat to be poked and probed."

Go Remus, thought Harry in surprise. The violin music stopped, and he grew more conscious of the ticking of the grandfather clock.

"I'm sorry, Albus," Remus said quietly, "I didn't mean to jump down your throat. Harry — he's seen such horrors — he doesn't need to be reliving them in his waking hours as well. He needs time to heal."

"True," Dumbledore said slowly. The floor creaked again. "Oh, hello, Alastor," said Dumbledore. "I'd thought you'd already retired?"

"Job's not over till all the little buggers are tucked in nice and tight," growled Mad-Eye.

"Security has been increased?" Dumbledore checked, sounding business-like.

Moody grunted an acknowledgment and provided a quick security report, which included tightening Apparition controls. Harry smiled into his pillow at the way the elderly Auror was reporting dutifully to a pair of teenagers.

"Well, if worst comes to worst," Moody added gruffly, "we can always pack him back off to the Muggles."

Harry stiffened in alarm. They wouldn't!

"Over my dead body!" Remus snapped.

A thick silence fell between the Order members. The tick-tocking of the grandfather clock seemed even louder now to Harry, like a bomb that might go off any minute.

"From what you've told us, Alastor," said Dumbledore, "the house is tight as a drum."

"Near as, but I'd wager this old house still has a few back doors we haven't found yet," Moody warned them ominously.

"True," Dumbledore agreed with a sigh. "Pre-existing Portkeys and portals are always a risk, but I have every faith in your security measures."

"Alastor, you said something at dinner," Remus prompted him, "something about extra security for Harry?"

"Right," said Moody, "thanks for reminding me."

Harry yelped as several hairs were yanked from his head.

"Mad-Eye!" admonished Remus. "Was that really necessary?"

"Oh, good, you're awake," said Moody. Harry looked up with one bleary eye and rubbed at his scalp. Moody grasped Harry's wrist. "You wear this often?" Not waiting for an answer, Mad-Eye removed and pocketed Harry's moodstone wristband.

"Why don't you let Severus take care of that?" suggested Dumbledore.

Moody snorted derisively. Harry silently agreed; he didn't fancy Snape having anything to do with his security!

"Take care of what?" he moaned, rising to his elbows and feeling for his glasses.

"Bed!" Mad-Eye growled at Harry. He stumped away and kicked at a bundle of rags under the piano. "Up!" he ordered. "I've got a job for you."

Moody turned his attention to Susan, Hermione, and Hannah, who were now fast asleep beneath tartan blankets. He looked like he was going to shake the girls awake, but Minerva McGonagall intervened.

"I'll take care of the girls, Alastor," she whispered.

Minerva drew her wand and started levitating the sleeping beauties off the sofas. Elphias Doge was swift to offer his assistance. Young Minerva blushed and nearly dropped Hermione, causing Dumbledore to snort a laugh. Minerva shot him a dark look. Far too late, he tried to cover up with a cough.

"Why don't you take them up, Albus?" she suggested archly. "Third floor — large room — you can't miss it."

"It would be my pleasure!" Dumbledore said genially, and he leapt energetically to his feet. Smiling fondly at the three floating witches, he carefully tucked in their tartan blankets, making them look like three misshapen tins of Scottish shortbread-biscuits, then gently floated them out of the drawing room.

"Ah, Professor McGonagall?" said Harry. "I'm not sure if the Headmaster knows there's a gender line across the girls' room."

Young Minerva merely raised one shapely eyebrow. "I'm counting on it."

"Right," Remus ordered sternly, standing in the doorway of Harry's bathroom and looking every inch a sixth-year prefect, "everybody out of the pool!"

A great deal of splashing and giggling sounded, and voices pleading, "Just a bit longer!"

Harry tried to see past Remus's shoulder, but Remus kept blocking his view.

"George, put Gwenog down. ... I'm sorry, Tonks, no, you can't Disapparate right now. ... Who gave Viktor the Weepies Potion? Listen, it's past four in the morning! ... Yes, I know, Viktor. ... Well, I'm sure it won't seem so bad in the morning. ... Hestia put that fish back. No, I don't want to get in. ... Yes, I'm sure the water's wonderful, but it's time for bed. ... No, Oliver, your own bed! Lee, would you please get rid of that drummer. ... Charlie Weasley, stop that this minute!"

One by one, bikini-clad witches slipped from the bathroom, dripping and shivering as they dashed past the birthday boy, clutching at Remus's

conjured towels and offering hasty apologies.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks giggled breathlessly. "Where d'you get to, anyway?" she threw over her shoulder. "We were waiting for you!"

"Oh, don't leave on my account," Harry said weakly, eyeing the girls longingly. Amongst them were the Patil twins and also Lavender, Alicia, and Katie. Apparently, the *girls* hadn't had any problems convincing Fred and George to let them into Harry's bedroom. Harry's camera swept along in the girls' wake, its green eye blinking serenely.

"Out!" Remus demanded, shepherding the last stragglers from the room.

"Seriously cool Giggling Potion, Fred!" chortled Lee, slapping a wet hand on Fred's shoulder. "Come on guys," he giggled, beckoning The Weird Sisters to follow him.

Charlie, Hestia, and Gwenog were last to stumble from the bathroom, also giggling helplessly. The Jones' sisters apologised profusely and planted fat kisses on Harry's cheeks in farewell before fleeing. Then a great burst of squealing giggles erupted from the hallway. Harry and Remus bolted outside.

Surrounded by a gleeful gaggle of scantily clad witches, stood one very red-faced, pink-snouted, and decidedly nervous-looking Hogwarts Headmaster.

No one made it to breakfast. Lunchtime found the kitchen overflowing with pyjama-clad guests, nibbling leftovers and spreading gossip. There was a good deal of sniggering over the antics of the olds, but the birthday-boy, sporting a bulging black-eye, copped his share of ribbing as well. If he heard one more sleeping-dragon joke ...

Lee suddenly burst into the kitchen, calling out, "Has anyone seen Donaghan Tremlett?"

"Who?" said Harry.

"Bass player for The Weird Sisters," Lee muttered, looking under the table. "Come on, we won't get our bond back if we can't find him."

Harry checked the drawing room, found Susan playing the piano, and promptly forgot all about bass players.

"What's all this?" he asked curiously, nodding to a mess of hand-written music spread across the piano. "Do you write your own stuff?"

"Trying to," Susan said wryly. "I never seem to get too far before it starts sounding like someone else. Drives me nuts."

Smiling, she tipped her head to other half of the piano seat and they chatted happily awhile about the ancient teens. As they talked, she played random strings of notes to emphasise her words. Harry grinned when he twigged she didn't even seem to fully realise she was doing it.

"It was just *amazing* seeing my auntie like that," Susan gushed. "She's usually so ..." She played a few notes of a funeral dirge, and Harry chuckled. "I mean, not all the time," Susan said, playing a couple of happier notes, "but I like it when she jokes around. Kind of like Professor McGonagall, you know? Oh, and what about the *Wheel!*" Susan played a da-da-da-dumb for effect. "That was so romantic, what Mr Doge did when her name came up. The way he fought for her so she didn't have to do it — and then she picks *him*, and he just kisses her fingers." Susan sighed happily. "Sooo romantic ..."

"Yeah?" Harry said with a laugh. "Maybe that's what I should've done."

"What — with Parvati?" Susan said teasingly. "Oh, I don't know; you looked pretty pleased with yourself."

"Well, the Truth thing was still scary," said Harry.

"Tell me about it!" laughed Susan. "Thank you for saving me, by the way," she said, playing a few trembling high notes. She stopped and winced a little. "And I'm sorry for putting you on the spot with my question ..."

"It's okay; it was a good question," Harry said truthfully. Feeling game, he nudged Susan's shoulder with his own and said, "So tell me, who *do* you fancy?"

Susan played some suspenseful notes. "You don't *really* expect me to answer that, do you?"

Harry smiled but said nothing; he was pretty sure it was Justin. Curiosity finally got the better of Susan, and she nodded to Harry's eye.

"I heard you had a little accident. Is everything okay? With you and Cho, I mean? She was really sorry about it upstairs ..."

When Harry hesitated, Susan bit her lip and waved the question away.

"Sorry," she said. "It's none of my business. Forget I said anything."

"No, it's okay," Harry said, surprised to find that he meant it. "I dunno," he confided, "I guess I'm wondering if me and Cho is such a great idea."

Susan's smooth brow creased. Then she stopped playing the piano entirely.

"Because of last night?" she asked sceptically.

Harry wished he'd kept his mouth shut. He didn't know what it was about Susan, but he always seemed to find himself telling her more than he meant to.

"Kind of," he said. "I mean, no, not really. I mean, there's other stuff ..."

Harry's voice trailed off lamely. The silence thickened and Susan started shuffling music sheets that didn't look like they particularly needed shuffling. Harry felt the oddest urge to pick up the girl's fingers and put them back onto the keys — to go back a few notes in the conversation. But then she started to play again all on her own.

"This is *Reverie*," she said, "one of my standard 'party pieces'."

Harry knew she was changing the subject to let him off the hook, but for some unfathomable reason, her doing exactly what he wanted her to only made him feel worse. Hermione was always bossing him around, making him feel guilty about things. It didn't help, of course, that she was usually right, but she was always pushing. Sometimes, even though he might actually agree with her, Harry would shut down because she pushed so hard. With Susan, though, he felt as if he wanted to talk because she didn't push. Maybe it's a Hufflepuff thing, he mused. All the Gryffindor girls were a bit bossy, really.

Whatever the reason, as Harry sat and listened to Susan playing her delicate, contemplative piece, one thought kept turning over uncomfortably in his mind: he hated the thought of her thinking ill of him.

"It's not what you think," he said finally.

"Oh? What is it that I think?" Susan said serenely, advancing to a stronger passage within *Reverie*.

"Well," Harry started, "you know, that I ..." His voice trailed off ineffectually again.

"That you seemed to like her well-enough yesterday?" Susan offered bluntly, picking her way through a difficult passage. "That when she accidentally decked you, you suddenly decided that maybe she wasn't the love of your life after all?"

"Yeah," Harry said, rubbing at his forehead. "I mean, no, I mean, that that's what I think you thought ... I think."

Harry's head was really too fragile today to deal with such complexity.

"What I *really* think, Harry," she said mildly, "is that it doesn't matter what I think and that you need to be talking to Cho not me."

Harry opened his mouth, ready to voice an objection but then struggled to find one.

"Fine," he said shortly, rising from their seat.

Susan made no effort to stop him. Harry really didn't know what was wrong with the girl.

"I just thought you might be able to help me," he muttered, loitering at the edge of the piano, "but if it's too much trouble ..."

Susan stopped playing and stared at him for a long moment.

"Sit," she said.

Harry tried not to sit too fast.

"Right," Susan said with a small resigned sigh, "you said you already had doubts about you and Cho; you already broke up once before, didn't you?"

"Twice," he admitted, remembering their woeful Valentine's date, "but, yeah, after that whole Marietta fiasco."

"Why did you break up?" asked Susan.

"Marietta betrayed us!" he said indignantly.

Susan nodded. "And how is that Cho's fault?"

"She tried to make excuses for her — tried to say she was a '*lovely person really*'," he said sarcastically, "said she just '*made a mistake*' going to Umbridge!"

Susan nodded assessingly, as if weighing evidence. "So she was loyal to her friend."

Annoyed to find himself tangled up in such unreasonable logic, Harry said, with some asperity, "Well, yeah — I mean, I guess so."

"Tough position for Cho to be in," Susan observed. "Don't know what I would've done in her place ... if it were Ernie, say."

"Ernie would *never* have done what Marietta did," Harry declared heatedly.

Susan let this go unchallenged and resumed playing random notes. The music seemed to ease the tension. Harry began to wonder if she did it

deliberately.

"So ... why did you and Cho get back together then?" Susan asked delicately.

Harry was stumped. Good question, he thought jadedly.

"Well," he said slowly, "we kind of made up about the Marietta thing, and I guess there was still something there ..."

Susan waited patiently, filling the silence with more notes, but Harry couldn't think of what more to say.

"You two always seem to be either really happy or really miserable," Susan observed cautiously, "there never seems to be too much in between."

Harry nodded glumly.

"Look, Harry, talk to Cho," Susan urged him, "but don't expect things to get sorted out overnight. Both of you are really passionate people. You *both* need to be willing to change if you want to make it work."

Harry nodded politely, but privately thought Susan's advice was just rubbish. She'd completely missed the point. What he really needed to know was how to break up with the girl! He dearly hoped Bill Weasley would drop by, but he didn't, and by mid-afternoon Cho and the other guests were assembled in the drawing room with bags and broomsticks, ready for Professor Dumbledore to transport them away. Cho had wrangled a promise from Gwenog Jones for a large number of tickets for the next Holyhead Harpies game and was busily checking off who needed what. Colin had been just as busy. Practically bursting with glee, he slipped Harry a packet of photos fresh from the potions lab.

"Anything embarrassing?" Harry checked from the corner of his mouth.

"Not for *us*," Colin giggled mischievously.

Harry quickly scanned the photos, removed three and let Colin pass the rest around. Colin was in his element, racing around and taking last minute orders for copies, the hottest request being for a certain truffle-hunting Headmaster.

"You're going to need a *lot* more duplication potion," Colin advised Harry happily before bolting back down to the potions lab.

Remus had offered to lift his gender hex, but Dumbledore insisted he wanted to 'give it a shot' himself, though, like with the twins' spells, any attempt to lift it only made things worse. The last time Harry had seen his Headmaster, his nose had grown a foot.

Farewelling his guests one by one, Harry's arm grew sore from being heartily pumped by the boys but farewell kisses and hugs from the girls more than made up for that. Harry caught a whiff of jealousy from Cho, but she generally showed remarkable restraint (helped, perhaps, by her guilt over his black-eye). Then it was time to say goodbye to her, too, and Harry's niggling doubts and frustrations fell away, just as they always seemed to do whenever he had her snuggled safe inside his arms.

"Enough of that!" Ginny called, interrupting their kiss with an oddly strained laugh. She and Ron were also leaving with the rest of the party guests.

"Mum wants us home for a bit," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Says she misses us, but that just means she's got a mile of chores lined up."

Potterfest16! was officially over when Dumbledore arrived to huge cheers. The adults had resumed their regular age by now, but Dumbledore still had one party souvenir — and it was currently whistling Jingle Bells.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 12 – One Female

Predictably, Petunia Dursley was horrified to see Elizabeth Ramsay — Elizabeth didn't even make it past the doorstep. Petunia wasted no time in telling her he was spending the summer with his guardian, and, no, she didn't know the address.

It took little effort for Elizabeth to deduce Sirius took their godson to his mother's old house, but for the life of her she could not recall the address, which effectively confirmed a *Fidelius* Charm — or that her memory was rubbish. Elizabeth felt broom-lagged enough for it to be either. Making her way into the centre of London, she was deeply grateful for the familiar sights and smells of the Leaky Cauldron Inn, though she couldn't help noticing how deserted the place was, even for a Sunday evening.

“Evening, Mistress,” landlord Tom said with a polite bow. “Spot o' supper?”

“Thank you, Tom,” Elizabeth said wearily. “A room, too, if you have one.”

Tom squinted more closely at the woman. At five-foot-three with wide-set blue eyes, long sandy hair, and fine cheekbones, Elizabeth was accustomed to turning an old head like Tom's, but right now she knew he was seeing bloodshot eyes, greasy hair, sagging shoulders, and slightly mismatched eyebrows.

“Mistress Ramsay?” he said with surprise. “Well, I never. How many years has it been?”

“Too many, Tom,” she replied hoarsely, “far too many. I think a room first ... I'm very tired; I've just flown in from Canada.”

“Say no more,” he said kindly. “Room eleven's all made up.”

Tom collected the key and a lantern and led Elizabeth to her room, then returned with a supper tray. A small pail of Floo Powder stood by the fireplace, but Elizabeth couldn't decide who to call. Two years had passed without a word from Sirius, which Elizabeth took as a good sign for it meant he hadn't been recaptured. As far as she knew, only the Order knew of his innocence — and Harry, of course. After picking at her peas and pumpkin mash, Elizabeth tried three Floo locations for Albus Dumbledore without success. Nor was she able to make contact with any of her other Order of the Phoenix friends. She was rapidly running out of members to call — Remus was the last. She nervously checked her reflection in the mirror then sat down again, making sure at least her robes were straight. Then she chickened out and tried Moody again, but there was still no answer. She was down to her last fistful of Floo Powder. She placed the call to The Lodge and held her breath waiting for Remus Lupin to appear.

He didn't.

Evil mewed fitfully and climbed into Elizabeth's lap demanding attention. Elizabeth leaned further into the fire and peered around a darkened parlour lit only by the magical green flames of her own fire. All was neat but slightly dusty — there was a feeling of disuse. She called out Remus's name a few more times before giving up, feeling strangely relieved and disappointed at the same time.

Now at a complete dead end, the adrenaline that had kept her going was fading away and the reality of returning to a country on the verge of civil war started sinking in. Voldemort was back.

“It's happening all over again,” she whispered, caressing the golden feline in her arms.

Six months after the murders at Godric's Hollow, Elizabeth woke in Saint Mungo's Hospital, woke to find her world in ruins, her best friends dead or imprisoned. Woke to find the Wizarding World still giddy over the demise of Lord Voldemort. Woke to find Alice and Frank couldn't. Woke to find people had moved on, the currency of their grief already spent — everyone except Remus. Elizabeth spilled Evil to the floor and prowled the room, anger and frustration building. Harry was with his guardian, but who was Sirius's Secret-Keeper? Remus? Dumbledore? Doge? Moody? It was maddening being unable to reach anyone, but Elizabeth knew of one back door into Sirius's house, and she could be there in two hours.

“Evil, back in the bag,” she said decisively. “We're leaving.”

It had seemed such a good idea at the time. She'd been travelling all night and was barely halfway. Most of her time had been wasted doing exactly what she was doing right now: backtracking and searching for her right hand. After a nasty Splinching in Surrey, she'd resorted to Apparating with her right arm petrified against further damage. It had worked for an hour or so, but it was getting harder and harder to hold herself together. Evil had been a great asset, of course, for not only were Kneazles extremely loyal, and excellent at sniffing out unsavoury characters, they also had exceptional tracking abilities. Evil pawed his mistress's left leg, and she dutifully banked left. He meowed suddenly and relief washed over Elizabeth. She couldn't see it herself, but if Evil said it was there ...

“Accio hand!” she called out, pointing her wand with her left hand whilst trying to balance her broomstick with her knees.

Her right hand rushed to her from a clump of dense bushes. She nearly fell off trying to catch it; she'd always been hopeless at Quidditch. Landing in a forest glade, she set about reattaching the frozen limb. Evil mewed and pawed at her rucksack.

“We'll get going in a minute, precious,” she muttered through a weary yawn.

Evil hissed in annoyance and pulled harder at the rucksack. Elizabeth let the straps slip from her shoulders. She assumed he wanted to climb inside, but Evil had other ideas and dragged the bag to a sheltered spot under a large pine.

Elizabeth chuckled softly. "Okay, sweetie, you win, we rest."

Sinking with Evil into the forest floor, the smell of the pine needles so comfortingly familiar, Elizabeth started to relax. She conjured a pillow and an eiderdown quilt and fell asleep to the beat of Evil's tiny heart. It was late on Monday afternoon when she awoke to find him licking her nose. She shoved him away then sat up abruptly.

"Get out of that!" she cried, fumbling for her wand. A goat was happily munching the birch twigs of her broomstick. "Shoo!"

Elizabeth sent a jet of water at the goat, but it was not to be chased away so easily. She resorted to casting a Tickling Charm on its legs. *That* got the goat's attention. It quickly scampered off, and Elizabeth waited for it to get a good distance away before removing the hex. The goat stopped and bayed at her, clearly unimpressed, then shuffled off unsteadily with its nose in the air.

Elizabeth wearily assessed the damage. Her broom wasn't a complete write-off, but it would certainly slow her down. She'd also managed to thoroughly drench herself. Squelching to her feet, she grumpily vanished her sopping-wet eiderdown. With another complicated swish of her wand, and mentally cursing all mountain goats, she started blowing hot air over herself. When she was dry enough, she summoned her trusty Magical World Atlas from her bag and laid it across her lap.

"Where am I, please?" she asked politely (the atlas was very old and could be a tad cantankerous).

The pages of the atlas fluttered back and forth, searching. The fluttering stopped and a red dot blinked in the centre of a page depicting the very tree she was sitting beneath, along with the words: You Are Here.

Elizabeth held a finger to the blip and said, "Wider, please."

The map zoomed out, wider and wider for as long as she held her finger to the page. Elizabeth kept zooming until she had a clear fix on her position: southern France, approximately halfway between London and Tunisia. Considering the situation in Britain, it was feasible that Sirius and Harry might even be on Black Island right now. Elizabeth's heart beat a little faster at the thought of seeing them both again. She couldn't help but wonder if Remus might be with them. If she could just see him again ...

Elizabeth shook her head dejectedly. No. Nothing had changed, nothing that should make a difference anyway. She returned to examining her atlas. The most *direct* route would be to island hop through Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily. It would be *safer*, however, to travel down either the Iberian or Italian peninsulas keeping over land as much as possible. She set the atlas down, petrified her right arm and tested it by trying to Apparate to the other side of the tree. Evil appeared a moment later. He dropped her frozen hand into her lap and they both stared at it glumly. While she reattached it, Elizabeth finally admitted to herself that Hyper-Flying — Apparating at all — was no longer a viable travelling option. She needed to get to the closest Wizarding Transportation Centre and book passage to Tunisia by International Portkey.

Turning back to the atlas, she traced a finger down the Italian peninsula. Unbidden, her fingertip drifted off track and she found herself over Venice.

"Closer," she whispered. The lagoon came into view — then the islands — then the Grand Canal — the Doge's Palace — the Bridge of —

Elizabeth slammed the atlas shut.

"Don't do this to yourself," she intoned, swiping impatiently at her eyes. Evil climbed over the atlas and demanded to be cuddled. She clung to her small companion, comforted by his warmth and weight against her chest.

"Right," she said huskily, reopening the atlas, "where were we?"

Nothing happened.

"Please," Elizabeth offered contritely.

"Are you two quite comfortable?" Remus asked, strolling into the drawing room and setting down a pair of steaming mugs of hot chocolate on the coffee table.

Having farewelled the party guests, Harry and Hermione were curled up drowsily in opposite corners of the longest couch, their legs entangled. Around them lay a sea of scarlet and gold balloons that had floated overhead during the party but were now hovering around knee height. One had found a home on Harry's left earlobe. Swatting it away, he yawned an affirmative to Remus and nudged Hermione's hip with his foot.

"Monkshood," mumbled Hermione, her eyes shut, "reduce fe-fe-fever ..."

Harry wiggled his big toe under her ribs and she awoke, startled.

"What?" she said blearily. "Stop that!" she grumbled, kicking him back.

"You kick like a girl," sniggered Harry. Swinging his feet away, he reached for his hot chocolate and found himself on the floor.

"Hey!" he cried.

Hermione stretched victoriously along the slippery leather. "So nice of you to finally notice!"

Harry responded by launching himself on top of her, tickling her mercilessly, Hermione squealing in protest. Soon they were both on the floor, the coffee table rocking alarmingly.

"*Dissendium*," Remus said with a lazy swish of his wand. Harry and Hermione shot to opposite sides of the room.

"Hey!" Harry complained, padding back to the coffee table scattering scarlet and gold bubbles. "No hexing the underaged!"

"Sorry, Remus," Hermione said meekly, collecting her drink.

"If you two will excuse me," he said, leaning over the back of an armchair, "I need to find Mad-Eye. Do try to play nice, kiddies." He stopped at the door to look back at them. "Oh, and see if you can find that lost guitarist, would you? I need to take the music box back to the hire shop."

Harry waved him off then flopped back down on the couch with Hermione, their feet on the coffee table as they sipped their hot-chocolates and played an idle game of balloon tennis. Punching a gold one to the ceiling, Harry spotted a lonely party-streamer (the rest having been filched as souvenirs) and smiled at it: *361 sleeps to Potterfest17!*

"Harry, I wanted to ask you ..." Hermione started, hugging a balloon so tight it squeaked. She had that look on her face, the look that told Harry he wasn't going to like her question. "That nightmare you had on Saturday night — you said it wasn't about Lord Voldemort ..."

"True."

"Or Death Eaters?" she suggested leadingly.

Harry shook his head. He expected she'd been waiting for just such an opportunity for days.

"Was it Snuffles?" she asked in a small voice.

"Nah, it was just a bad dream," Harry said dismissively, hoping she'd drop it.

"Terry said you called out a word ... a name?"

Harry sighed resignedly.

"What was it, Harry?"

"You don't need to hear about my weird dreams," he muttered.

"Tell me, please," she pressed worriedly. "It might be important. What if someone's trying to send you false visions?"

"It wasn't false," Harry admitted before he could stop himself.

Hermione gasped and nagged him even harder for details. Harry blew out his cheeks; it had to be easier to just tell her.

"Look, it was just a normal dream — at first — then there was this, well, this demon."

"It attacked you?" asked Hermione.

"Not exactly."

"What kind of demon?"

"How should I know?"

"What did it look like?"

"She was —"

"She?"

"Do you wanna know or not?"

"Sorry — sorry," said Hermione. "Go on."

"Anyway," said Harry. "I fell off my broom and George grabbed me —"

Hermione gasped.

"What now?" Harry moaned.

"You fell off your broom! George caught you yesterday! Remember?"

"Yes, Hermione, I was there, *remember?*"

"Sorry, sorry. But it's like you predicted it!"

Hermione's eyes were very bright; she'd taken quite an interest in prophecies since finding out some were real. Harry rubbed at his jaw in thought. Could there really be a new demon out there waiting to grab him? The thought should have filled him with fear, but, really, there was already quite a queue. And there was something about Megaera, something he couldn't quite put his finger on ...

"Then what happened?" Hermione prompted breathlessly.

Harry leaned forward; maybe his nightmare wasn't just about him being jealous.

"Well, I look up, right?" he said more interestedly. "And it's not George any more; it's this demon grabbing me."

"But she didn't hurt you?"

"No, but I woke up, didn't I."

"Why did you wake up?" Hermione moaned, as if he'd done it on purpose just to vex her.

"Well," Harry said sarcastically, "if you saw this ruddy great demon with blood dripping from her eyes screaming at you to wake up and —" Harry stopped himself, "— no, hang on — George was the one screaming. The snakes were telling me —"

Harry broke off on hearing the distinctive clump-clump of a wooden leg.

"Afternoon," Mad-Eye growled, puncturing a few balloons with his splintered old stump.

"What snakes? What did they say?" Hermione begged at the same time, her eyes even wider and brighter.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said loudly, nudging Hermione to shut up. "Remus just went looking for you. Everyone get off okay at The Burrow?"

Mad-Eye grunted an affirmative and tossed Harry's moodstone wristband back to him.

"Put that on," he ordered.

Harry eyed the wristband suspiciously. "What did you do to it?"

"Nothing too terrible," Mad-Eye said gruffly, "just a security thing. What did Lupin want?" Before Harry could ask what kind of 'security thing', Mad-Eye said, "Suppose he wants to know the test results. Tell him they came back female — that's all we've got — one female."

One female! A chill sped up Harry's spine, jerking him to his feet.

"At Privet Drive?" he demanded. Mad-Eye said nothing. "It was *her*, wasn't it?" challenged Harry.

"Who?" said Hermione. "What's going on?"

"Death Eaters!" Harry declared. "Last night — in Privet Drive!"

Hermione gasped in horror.

"Who said anything about Death Eaters?" growled Mad-Eye, but he didn't sound very convincing. "Put that on," he ordered Harry, indicating the wristband, "and leave it on! Tell Lupin I'll do another patrol then I'm headin' home to kip."

Mad-Eye paused a moment — even his electric-blue eye stopped spinning.

"It'll be okay," he said gruffly to Harry.

Something about the way Moody said that made Harry more nervous than any of his more usual pessimistic warnings. He held out his wrist to Hermione, and she silently tied on the wristband. The moodstone swirled through a rainbow of colours, finally settling on a slate-grey.

"Right," Moody said, all business again, "tell Lupin then."

He made to leave, but Harry sailed through the balloons to catch him at the door. Moody's hesitated a moment then accepted the boy's smooth hand within his own leathery mitt. Harry was struck by how spent the wizard looked.

"Thanks, Mad-Eye, for everything."

"Right," Moody said gruffly, shaking his hand, "try to stay out of trouble, eh?" He shook his head ruefully as he stumped out the door. "You know, running around after a bunch of teenagers for four days, I'm startin' to think Barty Crouch did me a favour, lockin' me up in my trunk all year."

Harry closed the door and braced himself. *Three, two, one —*

"Harry, what's going on? Did they attack your family?"

Sitting back down, Harry filled Hermione in on what little he knew.

"Do you really think it was Bellatrix Lestrange?" she asked anxiously

"How many other female Death Eaters do we know," countered Harry, "ones who are both free and have me right at the very top of their *to do* lists?"

"But your scar ..." Hermione said questioningly.

"Nothing," Harry agreed thoughtfully. "Do you think the dream — I mean Lestrange is a Black, right? The demon was black, black-skinned anyway."

"But the demon didn't hurt you," Hermione pointed out.

"Maybe I woke up too soon? George was screaming at me to wake up — then the demon grabs me — and she's laughing —"

"The demon was laughing," Hermione repeated, her eyes unfocused. "Bellatrix Lestrange!" she said abruptly. "She was laughing the hardest of all when they had us trapped in the Hall of Prophecy!"

Harry tensed; Lestrange's cackle of triumph ringing in his ears as clear as if it was yesterday. It had to be her! One night he dreams of a female demon grabbing him and the very next night a female Death Eater turns up in Privet Drive.

"You're safe here, Harry," Hermione said earnestly. "The Order isn't going to let anything hurt you." She hesitated a moment. "Maybe you shouldn't go to that Harpies game next weekend. You'd be safer staying here."

"No!" Harry said, suddenly and defiantly. "I will *not* spend my life in captivity!"

"But, Harry, if they make a move against you —"

"I'm not an idiot," he said impatiently, "don't you think I *know* the safest thing is to just hide out in my room —"

Harry broke off at the look of anguish on Hermione's face.

"Look," he said more evenly, "I'm not going to take stupid risks, but I am *not* going to let those monsters control my life."

The two friends stared at each other in silence for a long moment.

"But you *will* be careful," Hermione said softly.

"I *will* be careful," agreed Harry.

Hermione pulled him into a hug and Harry found himself engulfed in bushy brown hair.

"You have — pfft — *heard* of ponytails, haven't you?"

Hermione choked back a laugh and hugged him tighter.

"Do I need to separate you two again?" Remus drawled, strolling back into the room. Harry and Hermione broke apart, smiling.

"Just saying how glad I'll be to get rid of her," Harry said teasingly, to which Hermione lightly punched his thigh.

"Right," Remus said dubiously.

The smile on Harry's face slipped a little.

"Did you see Mad-Eye out there?" he asked. Remus shook his head. "You must have just missed him. He left some messages for you."

Remus sat down in a chair opposite him and nodded. Harry did his best to sound casual.

"He said he's gonna do some more patrols then head home — I think he's had quite enough of this house for a while. And he said the test results were back: one female."

Harry looked closely for his guardian's reaction. Remus frowned deeply and sat forward in his chair.

"One female?" he checked and Harry nodded.

He wondered what Remus would tell him if anything. Remus ran a hand through his thick but greying hair.

"Hermione, I wonder ... could you give us a moment, please?"

"It's okay," Harry said, "by me, anyway. I told her what happened last night."

Remus nodded; he seemed neither surprised nor upset.

"Right, well, there's not much more to tell, really. A Reattachment Charm was detected — in Arabella Figg's back yard of all places. It's okay," he added quickly, seeing the look on Harry's face, "she's away on holiday: Majorca, I believe. And I heard from Tonks earlier. She confirmed no other spells were cast within the sanctuary of Privet Drive. But then your aunt already told Kingsley everyone was fine ..." Remus's voice trailed off and he inspected his hands. "One female," he repeated distractedly. He drew a settling breath and looked Harry straight in the eye. "We can't be

sure it was her."

"No, not for sure," Harry agreed quietly.

"Harry, it's —"

"I'm fine, Remus," Harry said, meeting his guardian's worried eyes. "I mean, Death Eaters are after me — like that's something new."

Hermione looked between them.

"Well, there's *something* useful from this, anyway. Whomever it was, Lestrange or not, she got Splinched. That's got to say something, doesn't it? I mean it's not normal, is it — not for a fully trained wizard."

"Well, it's not unheard of," Remus said thoughtfully, "but more with youngsters — people just learning to Apparate. Of course, it can happen to anyone from time to time. A lot of witches and wizards won't Apparate at all; they prefer brooms or Floo travel or —"

"Voldemort!" Harry blurted, slapping a hand to his forehead.

The others snapped to attention.

"What is it?"

"Are you okay?"

"What?" Harry said, confused. Then he realised what he'd done. "No, sorry, sorry, my scar's fine. I was just remembering. Voldemort helped Bellatrix Lestrange to Disapparate. In the Atrium — at the Ministry. She was injured. One of the statues, or columns or something, fell on her. She was too weak to move on her own. Maybe she's *still* not at full strength? Voldemort was *furious* with her; he might not have helped heal her — and she can't just turn up at Saint Mungo's, can she."

Remus brightened a little. "You might be onto something, Harry. Very interesting."

"So," Hermione said, nodding to herself, "if it *was* Bellatrix Lestrange, it might indicate she's weaker than we thought. And if it *wasn't* her — if it was just some lost witch — well, either way, it doesn't seem quite so bad now, does it?"

The threesome exchanged small, hopeful looks and sank back in their seats, each lost in their own thoughts. For his part, Harry was relieved Remus was telling him things voluntarily — just like Sirius wanted to. The grandfather clock chimed six o'clock, reminding him of what he overhead while pretending to be asleep: how Remus resisted attempts from Dumbledore to grill him about his nightmare. Remus insisted he would've told them if there was anything to tell. Remus trusted him.

"Remus, you know that nightmare I had the other night — mind if we talk about that a bit?"

Remus and Hermione listened attentively whilst Harry recounted his dream.

"... And then I look up and this demon's got me instead of George. So I'm screaming, and there's blood dripping from her eyes onto my face, and there were like hundreds of snakes, and they're all saying one thing over and over: *Megaera*."

Both Hermione and Remus nodded thoughtfully but remained silent. Harry pursed his lips; he didn't go through all that just to get a few nods!

"Hermione thinks I was predicting stuff for the game yesterday," he suggested, "like George catching me when I fell. But then what about Cho disappearing? Why did my hand go through her like a ghost?"

"Maybe, subconsciously, you want to get rid of her," Hermione offered helpfully.

"I don't want her dead!" Harry declared indignantly. Remus held up a placating hand.

"It's more likely you just wanted her out of the way to protect her. Go on," he said encouragingly.

After sparing a withering glare for Hermione, Harry shrugged at Remus.

"That's pretty much it; I'm just hanging there over this abyss and *Megaera*'s got her claws into me and she's laughing, and I guess that's when I woke up."

More nodding.

"Well?" Harry prompted exasperatedly, looking from one frowning face to the other. "You *do* remember I failed Divination? Do you reckon that bit'll come true, too, or is it just my imagination going nuts or what?"

"Do you still have your copy of *Un-fogging the Future*?" Hermione queried briskly. "I seem to remember it had a useful classification of dream iconography in chapter seven."

Harry shook his head in reluctant admiration. "You gave up Divination in third year! How do remember stuff from a subject you don't even do?"

Hermione brushed his comment aside but looked rather chuffed. "Is it in your trunk?"

Harry shook his head. "Dumped it in the library. It's all yours. *Dream Oracle*'s down there, too, I think."

Hermione's eyes glazed over in a way Harry knew to mean only one thing.

"Off you go then," he said, confident that her greatest desire right now was to stick her nose into as many mouldy old books as possible.

Hermione fled. Harry smile left with her. He punched a red balloon in frustration; he was just so thoroughly sick of everything happening to him.

"Harry, listen to me," Remus said calmly, leaning forward, "predictions or not, you're safe here — you're safe. That's the important thing."

Harry nodded half-heartedly. The *important* thing was that he find a way to defeat Lestrange — to defeat Voldemort. Was his subconscious trying to remind him of that? He couldn't help but see similarities between Megaera and the demon self-portraits he'd drawn from his nightmares earlier in the summer. He didn't want to say it aloud, but he had to know. Remus wouldn't laugh at him.

"Remus, do you think — am I some kind of demon?"

Remus failed to hide his shock. "Why would you think that, Harry?"

"I'm supposed to have some power Voldemort doesn't," he said plaintively, unable to keep the desperation out of his voice, "something no one else has. What is it?"

Not waiting for an answer, Harry was suddenly on his feet, kicking balloons and spilling his fears.

"I can't do a tenth of what he can! I don't have it in me to do what he does to people! I can't possess them or kill them or torture them, even. How can I ever beat him? Everyone's counting on me, but I'm just some stupid kid! I couldn't even *move* when he had me cornered in the Ministry. I just stood there like I was paralysed or something. I don't know what I'm supposed to do —"

Remus grabbed him by the shoulders. "You *do* know, Harry."

"*I don't!*" Harry said desperately.

"You *do* know what you're supposed to do right now," Remus insisted. "The prophecy came out before you were born, and every year since then you've grown stronger, learned more about yourself, about the world. You are definitely *not* 'some stupid kid'. Just think of all the things you know now that you didn't know two, three, four years ago. The time may well come when you have to face Voldemort again, but right now he's off hiding somewhere and you —" Remus stopped himself "— we have to focus on keeping you safe and getting you through school. *We*, Harry, you and me. We're in this together, remember?"

Harry searched Remus's eyes, and a half-forgotten feeling swelled inside his chest, pushing back the fear. For the first time since hearing the prophecy, he felt a glimmer of hope. If he could just keep Voldemort off his back for a while — and with Remus to help him — like he had with the Dementors — maybe there was a chance.

"There's such power within you, Harry," Remus continued, "such strength. I know you can feel it, too. Some day you may have to tap into that power, and when that time comes, you're going to be as prepared as we can make you. Right?" When Harry said nothing, Remus gripped his shoulders more firmly. "Right?"

Harry stood a little straighter and nodded — more confidently this time.

"You're not a demon, Harry," Remus chastened him.

Harry regarded his feet sheepishly.

"Well," Remus conceded fairly, "maybe in the kitchen."

Elizabeth cursed herself. She'd done some stupid things on this trip but this was by far the most idiotic. She finally made it to the Magical Transportation Centre in Nice, on the French Riviera, but on presenting herself at the International Portkey Ticket Office, she did the unforgivable, she spoke in English. The French official sniffed disdainfully before advising she should return a week from Friday if she wanted to travel to Africa. Elizabeth hurriedly converted to perfectly fluent, university-accented French, but this only further ruffled the provincial Frenchman's feathers. Things then went from bad to worse when Elizabeth suggested a little gold might help free up an earlier Portkey. The ticket window slammed shut and Elizabeth was left with no option but to fly to Ventimiglia, just across the French/Italian border, and try her luck there. When she arrived at the second ticket office, it was already closed for the day. Slumped dejectedly against the shut window, her luck suddenly changed.

"Signora?"

A kindly Italian official in exquisitely tailored robes of gold and green tapped her on the shoulder. Elizabeth, close to tears by now, blurted her predicament in fractured Italian: she'd been travelling for days; she was desperate to reach her godson; the French in Nice turned her away; a goat ate her broom ...

The wizard, one Signor Bruno Vieri, could not speak for the goat, but he was appalled to hear of the Auror's mistreatment at the hands of the

French, though he said, with an exaggerated sigh, he was not at all surprised. Signor Vieri absolutely insisted Elizabeth join his wife, his mother, and his twelve children for supper, and he said he would make sure to put her on the first available Portkey the next morning. Within moments, Elizabeth was climbing out of a fireplace and into the cheerfully noisy Vieri kitchen, where Signor Vieri proclaimed the Auror's plight (embellishing it considerably), with the result that Elizabeth and Evil found themselves being thoroughly clucked over by the entire family.

Mama Vieri would hear no talk of Elizabeth finding a hotel, and Elizabeth, having been out of the Wizarding World for the best part of two months and feeling particularly fragile after the last few days, was well inclined to accept the Vieri's overwhelming hospitality. When dinnertime arrived, Mama Vieri beamed her approval as Elizabeth worked steadily through generous helpings of delicious gnocchi, pepperonata, Bolognese, and more. One of the sons even made a decent attempt at repairing Elizabeth's broomstick, and the whole family came to see her off early on Tuesday morning. There was some minor embarrassment when the Portkey was a little late (it was Italy, after all), but, as with everything else in Italy, it all seemed to work out, and Elizabeth was genuinely sad to farewell her gracious hosts.

Soon, she was exiting the Tunisian Ministry of Magic, the dry heat nearly knocking her off her feet. She quickly took to the air and tried to find a nice moist cloud she could fly through as she made her way towards the ancient city of Carthage. Nearing the Bay of Tunis, she dropped her altitude and enjoyed the sweeping views. She could even spot Muggle bathers in expensive hotel swimming pools. As she neared where Black Island should be, her smile faded. She circled a few times.

I was sure I parked it here.

Harry woke on Tuesday morning to find a snake dangling overhead, idly tickling his ear with the tip of his tail. Harry yawned and stretched out under the covers.

"So, are you talking to me yet?" he asked.

"Is everyone *really* gone yet?" countered Frank.

"Yes, Frank," Harry said soothingly, "it's just me and Remus — and Hermione, and she's leaving today."

Frank slithered down the bedpost and got comfortable on Harry's chest. He'd been most unimpressed, as it turned out, to have his personal domain invaded by 'all those horrible noisy people', and he didn't think much of the weird sisters either (and not just the ones in the band).

"Would you believe," he declared indignantly, "the pink one tried to take me *swimming*!"

Harry blurted a laugh but covered with a cough when Frank hissed disapprovingly.

"I thought snakes *liked* the water," Harry said. The Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets certainly seemed to like things moist and wet.

"Yes, but not boiling, bubbling, water," Frank grumbled. "And all those tone-deaf redheads — I still can't get their wretched song out of my head!"

"Which one?"

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts!" Frank hissed in disgust.

Harry laughed. "That's my school song!"

Frank reared back, appalled, but his opinion on the merits of the ancient ditty was cut short by a knock on the door. Frank tensed, but it was only Remus with their morning drinks. Harry smiled to himself as he pushed off Frank and climbed out of bed to join Remus in their wingchairs.

"You know," Harry said teasingly, indicating his tea, "I'm gonna get spoiled if you keep doing this all summer."

"You'll be back at school soon enough," Remus said, sipping on his coffee. "It's been nice having someone to fuss over, really."

Harry smiled into his tea and let the steam briefly fog his glasses. He knew what Remus meant. His friends always made him feel welcome, wanted even, but it wasn't quite the same as being needed.

"Can you see to Hermione's breakfast later?" Remus asked. "I don't think she's up yet. I've a few errands to run before we meet her parents."

Harry nodded; he and Remus were joining the Grangers for lunch at Covent Garden, and Harry was very much looking forward to getting out of the house.

"What kind of errands?" he asked him. Harry didn't really expect an answer, but he'd thought he'd try his luck anyway.

Remus winced a little and said, "I want to get a proper report on everything that's been happening over at Privet Drive. A few things don't seem to add up. I'm probably over-analysing, but I want to collect a few more facts, if possible. If I find anything useful, I'll need to pay the Headmaster a visit."

Harry nodded, his curiosity satisfied — for now.

"So tell me, just how long are you planning on leaving him whistling *Jingle Bells*?"

Remus raised his hands helplessly. "He insists on cracking it himself."

"Will he?" asked Harry.

"Of course," Remus said smoothly then his lips twitched, "... eventually."

Harry grinned. "So you're pretty good then — at hexes and stuff."

"I've had my moments," Remus admitted modestly.

"Can you show me?"

"What — the gender line?" Remus smiled reminiscently. "Your father was always after me to show him that."

"Did you?"

"Not bloody likely!" Remus said, laughing. "Or chances are you'd've just celebrated Potterfest *twenty*, not sixteen!"

"Now, Moony," Harry said, adopting his most innocent voice, "how can you expect me to learn and grow if you won't share your wisdom?"

Remus's lips twitched in amusement. "Cheeky little bugger."

"Well, what about other hexes?" said Harry. "I want to learn as much as I can."

"Okay," Remus said, nodding approvingly, "but consider yourself warned," he added mysteriously, "it could get brutal."

Harry regarded his guardian fondly. "So you didn't mind the prank *too* much the other night ..."

Remus's eyes twinkled and he put a hand across his heart.

"I have never been more proud, Harry," he said. "I suspect *Sirius* would've been even more impressed," he added wryly.

"True," said Harry. It felt good to be able to talk normally about Sirius — to remember good things.

He ambled off to the bathroom to run a hot bath, and Remus loitered at the door, reminding him of the need for increased security now that Death Eaters were on the move again. There would be no more dates in Diagon Alley, and Remus made it clear he would not be attending the Quidditch without a chaperone — or three — to which Harry rolled long-suffering eyes.

"Are you sure you'll be okay while I'm out?" Remus murmured, checking his watch. "I should be back by eleven, and someone from the Order will be around this morning ..."

"I don't need a babysitter, Remus."

"There's no harm in being careful," Remus countered. "In fact, maybe it'd be best if you stay home —"

"No way!" Harry said indignantly. "One way or another I'm getting out of this house today." Under the cover of gushing water, Harry added beneath his breath, "When d'you turn into such an old woman, anyway?"

It seemed werewolves had excellent hearing.

"You can't be *too* careful about security, Harry," Remus said stiffly.

"You sound like Moody," Harry grumbled. "'*Constant vigilance*' ... constant paranoia, more like."

"Yes, well, it wouldn't hurt for you to be a little more security conscious," Remus said sternly. "It's not paranoia if someone actually *is* after you."

"I *am* careful!" insisted Harry. Remus raised one eyebrow cynically and Harry rolled his eyes again. "What? So you reckon someone's gonna attack me in the bathtub?"

Harry waved his fusspot guardian away, and Remus left grumbling something about teaching his charge a few lessons about security. Harry closed the door and shook his head, thinking as he did so that Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were about as different as two guardians could possibly get.

Elizabeth finally spotted Black Island drifting several miles down the coastline. Sighing with relief, she accelerated towards it, her broomstick vibrating, birch twigs flying off into the wind.

"Come on," she begged her broom, "just a bit further ..."

On her descent, her broomstick was convulsing so badly she was nearly thrown off. Then the Braking Charm failed, sending her ploughing into the sand. Spitting out half the beach, she raised her head to find Black Island's two house-elves helping her to her knees.

"Mistress, Mistress!" cried Dovey. "Are you all right?"

"Lovey see you fly in," Lovey fretted, brushing sand from Elizabeth's cheeks. "Lovey tell Dovey is Mistress Elizabeth!"

"Dovey not believe Lovey!" Dovey confessed — smacking himself in the head for good measure.

"Evil ..." Elizabeth mumbled dazedly.

"Lovey has Kneazle," Lovey said soothingly, holding up Elizabeth's rucksack. Evil's ears peeked from the top.

The house-elves helped Elizabeth to the villa, and she let them mollycoddle her, drawing a hot bath and bringing her food and drink.

"Is been so *long*," Lovey tutted as she combed out Elizabeth's freshly washed hair. "Lovey and Dovey wait and wait for Mistress Elizabeth and Master Sirius to come back. But we is always ready," she added quickly, nodding to herself, "always ready."

Elizabeth stared into the mirror, watching the elderly elf gently untangling her blonde knots.

"I'm sorry, Lovey," she said sincerely, "it must be very lonely for you both here, all alone ..."

Lovey's big green eyes widened in horror.

"Oh, L-Lovey not c-complain," she stammered. "Lovey should *not* have said that! *Bad Lovey!*"

"Lovey — Lovey, it's fine," said Elizabeth quickly, "I know you and Dovey are very happy working for the Black family. They're exceptionally lucky to have two such fine and faithful servants."

Lovey swelled with pride. The Auror sighed inwardly. It was draining, sometimes, dealing with house-elf guilt trips.

"And you keep everything so spotless!" Elizabeth said warmly. "I know Master Sirius appreciates it enormously."

Lovey beamed adoringly at Elizabeth and resumed lovingly disentangling her tresses.

Elizabeth smiled sadly at the little elf. Lovey and Dovey had belonged to Alphard Black, who bequeathed them to Sirius all those years ago. Sirius did not know what to do with the grief stricken elves. Only just seventeen, he tentatively suggested they could have clothes if they liked. This had not gone down at all well. The house-elves clung desperately to Sirius, begging him not to set them free. Sirius agreed and the elves stayed on their beloved island home, faithfully serving him — even through his incarceration, never giving up hope, always ready for the day he would return to them. And he had, but he had not returned for two years now.

Ready at last to continue her journey, Elizabeth stood before the grandfather clock and strapped Evil tightly inside her Graphorn-hide rucksack.

"Sorry, precious," she apologised, "but I don't know what we're going to walk into. You'll be safe in there."

Graphorn hide was even tougher than dragon hide and could repel most spells. The last time Elizabeth went through the grandfather clock it had taken hours for Kreacher to pull out all the darts from her back. Elizabeth suspected Sirius's mother had deliberately hexed the clock for the express purpose of discouraging Alphard from visiting.

Drawing a deep breath, Elizabeth opened the grandfather clock, made a wish, and stepped inside.

Harry slid blissfully into his steaming bath. Holding his breath, he sank completely underwater enjoying the heat penetrating every inch of his body. Just as quickly, he erupted gasping for air and looking around crossly.

"Mirabella!" he glowered, slapping his hands against the surface of the water.

His haddock popped her head above the water line and winked at him with her false eyelashes.

"We have *rules*, Mirabella!" Harry said sternly, pushing dripping hair from his eyes.

"Oh, don't mind me," Mirabella sniffed. "Just send all those people to invade my home without so much as a *by your leave* — not to mention those horrid bagpipes! And now you *plunge* into my home without even a hello!"

"I guess things *have* been a bit crazy in here," Harry conceded ruefully.

"Well," Mirabella conceded, "the black-haired ones were nice. Like *you*," she added sweetly.

Giggling, she swam away, her pink and purple scales rippling the water, slid from the bath, and wriggled up the wall to her favourite rock.

"The black-haired girl who came alone was the *most* interesting ..." Mirabella said dreamily. "We had the *longest* chat."

"And just what did you and Miss Cho chat about?" Harry asked, toying with the soap.

"You!" Mirabella said, flicking her tail playfully. "She wanted to know *all* about *you* ..."

"Er ... what did you tell her?"

"Oh, you know ... girl talk ..."

"What did you tell her?"

Mirabella reclined on her rock, basking in the charmed sunlight pouring through a false dome in the ceiling.

"Sing for me and I'll sing for you," she offered cheekily.

"Do you like it when I sing?" Harry said curiously.

"Oh yes," Mirabella said happily. Leaping off the wall, she plunged into the water and swam over to him again. "You're much better than those awful shaggy musicians."

"Hey!" cried a new voice indignantly.

The soap popped right out of Harry's hands and skidded across the bathroom floor. Harry grabbed Mirabella to cover himself just as one of the half-sized Weird Sisters stumbled from the shower recess.

"Rockin' party, man!" Donaghan Tremlett grunted approvingly. The lost bass-player peeked curiously over the edge of the bathtub. "Cute fish!" he said.

Mirabella giggled furiously.

"Do you mind!" Harry said crossly, struggling now with the wriggling fish. "Get back where you came from!"

The musician chuckled throatily and toddled off obediently to the shower. Harry released Mirabella and she frolicked around the tub while he washed his hair.

"I'll tell you what Cho said if you sing for me," Mirabella reminded him when he was done.

Harry craned his neck; the bass player was now puddled on the floor of the shower recess, snoring. Relaxing back into his bath, Harry obliged his fish, lazily singing *She's Got a Tic in Her Eye*. By the time he ran out of lyrics he could remember, he was feeling rather prune-like and started to get out of the bath.

"You know — Cho, was it? — I think she fancies you," Mirabella said dreamily.

Harry eased back down.

"Yeah," he said sheepishly, "maybe ... I think she does a bit."

"Oh yes," confided the haddock coyly, "she said you were quite a catch — not that I took offence at that," she assured him. "Yes, she kept going on and on about your beautiful, emerald-green eyes ..."

Harry heard a snicker from inside the shower.

"... and your creamy skin, and your soft-soft lips, and the way you pout sometimes ..."

The guitarist laughed loudly. Harry's face grew hot. "Right. Well, that's probably enough of that —"

"... and how she feels all fluttery inside when you look at her all dreamy eyed and —"

"Okay, I get it," Harry snapped. The bass player stumbled from the cubicle, snorting with laughter.

"And when you kiss her ..." Mirabella cooed in a sing-song voice, "and when you press against her and she feels how much —"

Harry frantically grabbed the fish to shut her up. The bass player peered again over the edge of the tub and laughed harder. Mortified, Harry slid deep under the water, wishing the bath would just swallow him whole. Abruptly, he got his wish.

Kicking and clutching uselessly at the water, he was sucked straight into a yawning spa vent. Hot water shot up his nostrils as he pummelled through the pipes, as if on some mad water slide, skidding and bumping from side to side, his body banging through hairpin turns, his flesh ripping on jagged edges.

Harry thought his lungs would explode from lack of air, but that was suddenly the least of his problems. His body caught afire with a blast of scalding liquid searing his torn flesh. The water was gone in an instant and Harry hit solid ground, at first gasping for air then screaming in agony. Cruciatuus was nothing to this! Convulsing in pitch-black darkness, Harry knew he was dead. Then the air turned frigid and the fire exploding in his skin dulled but only slightly. A putrid stench assaulted his nostrils; he gagged on the foul air and threw up. A dozen tiny flames flickered to life casting an eerie orange glow. They illuminated a face.

Horrified, Harry stared into the sneering, heavily lidded eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 13 – Black, Blacker Than Black

Elizabeth slid through the grandfather clock, her wand at the ready, but nothing happened. The glass door swung shut with a tiny click. Someone's been busy, she thought, smiling around at an elegantly furnished room. Not Sirius, surely — he was never one to care for interior decorating. Could there be a new Mrs Black? Balloons littered the floor. Elizabeth glanced upwards to see a single party-banner caught in the chandelier. Her smile widened.

360 sleeps to Potterfest17!

“Sirius?” Elizabeth called, shrugging off her rucksack.

A muffled scream sounded. Elizabeth rolled her eyes; it seemed Sirius's mother was still hanging around. Bent over her rucksack, about to loosen the ties, Elizabeth heard a low growl. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted and she detected a strong whiff of cheap tobacco. Evil growled again. Elizabeth tightened her grip on her wand and tucked the rucksack safely under a side table.

“Quiet, sweetie,” she murmured.

The growling ceased immediately; Evil was well trained. Elizabeth crept around the sofas. Abruptly, the shutters slammed shut. Pinpricks of sunlight sent slender beams at crazy angles across the room.

“Sirius?” Elizabeth called again — then in a stage whisper, “Kreacher?”

“Yer won’t find that traitor ‘ere,” growled a voice from behind the piano.

Elizabeth dropped and rolled away whilst shooting a Disarming Spell towards the tobacco smell. The man dived for safety, and the pair faced off in the dim room, each taking cover behind an overstuffed armchair. They traded a few curses, but it was really a stalemate; they were doing more damage to the furniture than each other. Elizabeth’s mind raced. If this man thought Sirius was a traitor — but Harry was clearly living here. Is this why she’d failed to reach any members of the Order of the Phoenix? Had Death Eaters taken the house? Had they captured Harry?

“Who are you?” they both yelled at the same time.

“I’m supposed to be here!” growled the man. “Who’re you?”

Elizabeth assessed the layout of the room. Think, Lizzie, she chastened herself. If they had Harry, where would they hold him? If it were her, she’d use the basement.

“Cat gotcha tongue?” Tobacco Man sniggered. “No matter — the others are coming.”

Time to act, decided Elizabeth; she’d rather face one than a dozen. Holding her recently Splinched right hand close to her body, she screwed up her face in concentration. Nothing happened. She gave her cloak a swish. Still nothing. An Anti-Disapparition Jinx was going to make things difficult. With a flick of her wand, Elizabeth summoned every loose balloon to construct the world’s flimsiest room-divider. Tobacco Man snickered an ugly laugh.

“You’re gonna ‘ave to do better than that, love.”

Elizabeth hated being called love. With rapid jabs of her wand, she peppered the balloon-divider with hundreds of sharp little pins. Tobacco Man swore in fright. Elizabeth rushed through the exploding balloons and stunned him. Leaving him prone on the floor, she dashed for the door then froze. A snake lay in the doorway; behind it stood a blonde witch, her wand pointing straight at Elizabeth’s head.

“Zat is far enough,” she said in a heavy French accent.

The snake turned on its mistress, jaws bared, and the woman started in surprise. Elizabeth, for one, wasn’t going to let the distraction go to waste.

“STUPEFY!” she cried and the woman crumpled to the floor. Elizabeth squinted curiously at the snake. Did it just wink at her? “Thank you very much,” she offered, winking back at it. The snake bowed low.

Elizabeth conjured ropes and soon had Tobacco Man and Frenchie tightly bound together on the floor. Stepping over their bodies, she peered into the hallway. The snake slithered after her. Elizabeth had no idea why it helped her, but she could use all the distractions she could get.

“Come on then,” she whispered; she got the oddest sensation it was having a grand adventure.

Hugging the wall, they inched towards the stairs. The snake slithered forward and peeked through the balustrades then twisted back and shook its head. It was clearly warning her about something. Tobacco Man said ‘the others’ were coming. He also said she wouldn’t find Sirius here. Considering what she’d gone through to gain entry to the house, Elizabeth had no intention of leaving just yet, not until she knew where Harry was. Backing away, she created an anti-gravity mist and sent it drifting down the stairs. Retreating to the dark drawing room, she stole a few silver-blonde hairs from Frenchie’s head and reached inside her robes for the hip-flask of Polyjuice Potion she was never without.

“EXPELLIARMUS!”

Elizabeth slammed into a wall and screamed in agony as her wand, gripped tightly, flew across the room. More curses rained down upon her, and she crumpled to the floor, clutching at her spurting wrist.

"GEORGE!" yelled a furious female voice. "What the hell do you think you're doing? I said wait!"

George looked thoroughly unnerved as he struggled with Elizabeth's bloodied hand, smashing it repeatedly against a wall to shake loose her sparkling wand. Suddenly, the room was full of people. A pink-haired witch barked orders to secure the building then petrified the stump of Elizabeth's arm.

"Can't have you bleeding to death on us, now can we?" she said coolly.

Breathing hard, her jaws clenched, Elizabeth met her captor's gaze squarely. Through the haze of pain, something tugged at her memory: black eyes, heart-shaped face ... definitely had the look of a Black about her, a family historically riddled with Dark-Lord sympathisers.

Tobacco Man and Frenchie were revived and joined half-a-dozen other angry witches and wizards holding wands on Elizabeth. The snake wasn't taking this lying down; it reared at George, hissing furiously.

"*Stupefy!*!" George cried.

The snake flew high in the air then slammed heavily onto the floor.

"Who are you?" Pink demanded of Elizabeth.

Her breath ragged, Elizabeth said nothing. One of their hexes was keeping an invisible weight pressed hard upon her chest.

"Give her a mint," suggested a second redhead, a twin of the first. He had a very ugly glint in his eye.

"Forcing someone to take Veritaserum is illegal, Fred," Pink said casually. Elizabeth's eyes widened. "But I'm sure it won't come to that," continued Pink serenely. "Will it?" she said softly, a clear note of menace in her voice. "Who are you?" she demanded again.

Elizabeth swallowed; *Crucio*'s were one thing — but truth serum? She couldn't risk it. Perhaps if she gave up a little information voluntarily ...

"Ramsay," she rasped, "Elizabeth Ramsay."

Pink's wand held steady, but she was frowning, as though trying to remember something. Tobacco Man pulled a slim roll of parchment from within his ragged robes and held it up to a sliver of sunlight stealing through the shutters. Squinting, he ran a grubby finger down the edge.

"Not on the list!" he declared self-righteously. "Knew we had a live one!"

A wild-haired girl ran into the room, crying, "What's going on?"

"Doesn't anyone understand proper protocols!" Pink grumbled.

"What happened to Frank?" demanded the girl then she saw Elizabeth. "*What's going on?*"

Frenchie answered her. "We 'ave an intruder. Why are you 'ere?" she demanded haughtily of Elizabeth.

"She was calling out for Kreacher!" Tobacco Man snarled.

Still struggling to breathe, Elizabeth decided the truth was both believable and essentially harmless, all things considered.

"I was trying — trying to find — Harry — Harry Potter," she bit out.

"She Splinched!" the teenage girl cried triumphantly, jabbing a finger towards the stump of Elizabeth's arm. "You were at Privet Drive, weren't you!" she declared accusingly.

Startled, Elizabeth nodded slightly. Pink was still frowning.

"Did you say *Ramsay*?" she asked slowly.

"And just *what* do you want with Harry?" shrieked the teenage girl, her hair crackling with electricity. "Doing your master's dirty work, I suppose!"

Elizabeth stared at the girl. What 'master'? Something didn't add up. Her captors grew impatient. The invisible weight on Elizabeth's chest crept up her throat, pressing hard on her windpipe.

"Harry's my — my — god — godson," she rasped defensively.

She expected the group to snicker derisively, but they didn't. They merely looked surprised. They continued to hold their wands steadily over her but started whispering amongst themselves — everyone except the girl.

"Harry doesn't have a godmother!" she declared loudly then pursed her lips, not looking entirely sure of herself.

"She ain't on the list, Tonks!" Tobacco Man insisted.

Elizabeth's heart sank at the name. Not Andromeda's little girl ... the pink hair ...

"Dora?" she said weakly — a Death Eater like her Aunt Bellatrix?

Nymphadora Tonks swore softly and lowered her wand. Noises sounded from the hallway. Footsteps stumbled on the stairs. Elizabeth gasped as Remus appeared in the doorway, breathless, wand in hand, followed a moment later by yet another redhead. Remus stared in shock at Elizabeth, crumpled against the wall, then at the crescent moon of muttering Death Eaters.

"George," he growled, white-faced with fury, "would you *please* be so kind as to unhand my wife?"

A stunned silence fell as Remus strode into the room and took possession of Elizabeth's hand and wand. George tried to stammer an apology, but Remus angrily shoved him away and rushed to kneel beside his wife. Elizabeth's heart beat madly with relief — and not a little elation. With a flick of Remus's wand, the shutters flew open and the room flooded with sunlight once more. The attackers lowered their wands and looked guiltily at each other. Well, not the French witch so much.

"Remus, I'm so sorry," Nymphadora said, falling to her knees next to him. "I can reattach it — truly."

Remus's eyes travelled to the wide streak of blood smearing the wall. The dark look he delivered to the woman guaranteed she'd dearly regret it if she failed. He carefully cradled Elizabeth's hand up to its frozen limb whilst the Reattachment Charm was cast. Elizabeth loosed an involuntary yelp of pain.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's just broken!" Nymphadora jumped in nervously before Remus could bite her head off. "Episkey! Episkey! Episkey!" she recited with successive taps of her wand, and Elizabeth's bones mended, but everything was very wobbly.

Remus shoved Nymphadora aside — none too gently — and conjured bandages and splints.

"We should get you to Saint Mungo's," he said hoarsely, as he tightly bound Elizabeth's bruised and swollen hand. "Have them check you over."

Elizabeth dragged her eyes away from her husband to look warily around at what was now an embarrassed audience rather than a band of Death Eaters. Murmured apologies sounded from around the group, fading to an awkward silence. She could feel them surreptitiously lifting their various hexes. When her legs regained enough feeling, Remus helped her to her feet and sat her down in the least damaged armchair.

Leaning over her, he whispered, "I — I should've known you'd come — I'm so sorry, Lizzie."

Elizabeth sucked in a breath ... same shampoo ...

"Are you okay?" he asked worriedly, searching her eyes.

She nodded distractedly; she really wished she'd taken the time to straighten her eyebrows.

"The snake — is it okay?" she said. "It tried to help me."

Wincing, George revived the snake. It weaved unsteadily, as if drunk, then its head banged back onto the floor. The bushy-haired girl rushed to pick it up. It dangled limply in her arms, hissing softly.

"She weren't on the list, Tonks," Tobacco Man insisted nervously. Nymphadora silenced him with a look of the very deepest disgust.

Elizabeth wanted to ask Remus about Sirius, but she didn't know these people, didn't know if they knew the truth of his innocence. Tobacco Man called him a traitor; did the others think that?

"Remus, where's Harry?" she asked instead. "Is he all right?"

Remus shook himself back to the present.

"Harry — of course." He stood up to look around. "Good question. Tonks?"

Nymphadora spun on Tobacco Man.

"Dung?" she snapped.

"Eh? Harry?" Dung shrugged blankly. "Got summoned, didn't he. Be in the Panic Room, most like."

Remus frowned deeply.

"What Panic Room?"

Harry recoiled in horror from Bellatrix Lestrange, but it was only a photograph. Half-frozen, he scrambled on his belly in a cramped pile of refuse. He suddenly knew exactly where he was. Bile rose in his throat at the rancid smell. Convulsing, he tried without success to stop his head spinning. *Think!* Remus and Hermione would come looking for him, surely! But would they find him down here?

He tried to lift himself up enough to fumble at the door, but there was no handle. He pounded weakly and screamed for help. The activity made him thaw out a little and the fire came back, as if thousands of white-hot arrows were piercing his skin. Collapsing again, he scratched frantically at

the bottom of the rotted door. If he could just break through ...

His fingernails were split and bloody by the time he gave up. Wave after agonising wave of pain pummelled him. He tried to breathe through it, but the fetid stench of decomposing rats was overwhelming. Freezing and shaking, he curled into an increasingly tight ball. It wasn't nearly cold enough — he could still feel ...

His breath miraculously turned blessedly icy just as a rapid firing of distant bangs sounded. Jerking his head upwards, he hit the frozen boiler and all went black.

"This had better be important," Severus Snape sneered, sweeping into the drawing room.

"Did Dung fill you in?" Remus asked briskly.

"He said there was a false alarm," Snape said scornfully. "What is it *this* time? Some *prank* gone awry?"

Elizabeth stood in the shadows of the room watching the man she loved more than any other converse with the man she hated more than any other. Severus Snape continued wasting time, amusing himself by making them all wait. He cast a lazy glance at the damaged armchairs and snickered insipidly.

"Tsk, tsk ... and after all that work to make the place cosy for your pampered little prince."

Elizabeth stepped out of the shadows.

"That's quite enough. Where's Harry?" she demanded, coldly and clearly.

Snape turned to the new voice. What little colour there was in his face drained completely away.

"Madam Ramsay," he said stupidly.

"Where — is — Harry Potter?" Elizabeth bit through gritted teeth.

Snape, never a tall man but still taller than her, pulled himself up straighter. His beady eyes flicked around the unfriendly room. With what he clearly thought was a gallant sweep of his arm, he motioned towards the door, inviting Elizabeth to follow.

"The boy is quite safe, I assure you," he said stiffly.

Turning, he strode from the room, his travelling cloak billowing.

Harry stood atop a craggy mountain. He could feel the wind whistling around him, but there was no sound — none at all. He could see for miles and miles in every direction — and all at once — as if he had a thousand eyes.

It was so peaceful. He could see animals grazing, farmers tending their fields, villages, houses, hearths. He could see the face of a baby nestled in a crib by the fire. The baby's eyes opened. They were a brilliant green. Harry fell into them and saw nerves, blood, bone, brains. He was rushing through a vein, surfing on speeding red blood cells. A single heartbeat thumped. Louder. Faster.

Then it stopped.

As the search party descended the stairs, Mad-Eye Moody came stumping loudly through the front door, his magical eye spinning furiously, setting off old Mrs Black yet again.

"*Kreacher's cupboard?*" he roared at Snape. "That's your idea of a *panic* room?"

Remus pushed past Snape and bolted for the basement. The rest raced after him, leaving Mrs Black to wail alone.

"*GET HIM OUT OF THERE, LUPIN!*" Mad-Eye bellowed. "NOW!"

Remus ran down the left lane of some kind of Muggle bowling alley, skidding on the polished wood, using *Reducto* r Curses to blast apart the pins and ball-return apparatus, Elizabeth and the others close behind. Remus kept blasting until he reached the door of the old boiler cupboard — Kreacher's den. Moody, looking paler than usual, hurriedly hobbled and slid down the slippery alley after them, tripping in the gutters, his wand jabbing at the air, removing protective charms as he went. Elizabeth and Remus wrenched open the ice encrusted door and stared into their worst nightmare.

A foul stench assaulted Elizabeth's nose, but it was the sight of Harry curled like a foetus, bloodied and lifeless beneath an iced over boiler that made her scream. His thin, naked body was caked in blood, filth, and frost. Frozen fingers clutched his shoulders. Blood icicles hung from gashes on his back and legs. Pandemonium erupted, everybody trying desperately to assist. The bushy-haired girl was screaming hysterically. It took both redheaded twins to hold her back.

"GET BACK!" Moody roared.

Moody whipped off his cloak and laid it on the floor whilst Elizabeth levitated Harry, still in a foetal position, out of the cupboard and onto the cloak. Harry didn't stir whilst she and Remus wrapped him carefully in Moody's cloak. Elizabeth issued the counter-spell to unfreeze him. To her horror, she discovered he was not under a Freezing Charm at all, he was *actually* frozen — Muggle style.

"Remus," sobbed the teenage girl, "he can't be — hic — *REMUS!*"

Elizabeth checked the body for a pulse. There wasn't one.

"We need to warm him up," she said to Remus. "Remus, look at me!"

But Remus just stared at Harry's lifeless face, his blue lips, his cracked and frosted skin. Elizabeth and Moody tried to revive Harry with wands full of hot air and *Renervation Charms*. Other wands jabbed urgently over their shoulders, doing the same. The air grew thick with heat. Remus shook off his stupor and frantically joined in. Frost on Harry's eyelashes turned to water and dribbled over the bridge of his crimson nose. One eye opened a bare slit, revealing a sliver of brilliant green.

"He's alive!" cried Elizabeth.

Sucking in air, a deep hacking cough shook Harry's body.

"Harry! Can you hear me?" Remus begged. "Harry! Stay with me, son!"

But Harry was screaming in agony, his body convulsing in shock.

"*You're killing him!*" shrieked the teenage girl. "Stop it! Stop it!"

Elizabeth refroze Harry, magically this time.

"Saint Mungo's," Remus ordered shakily. "Fred, hail the Knight Bus; we're right behind you."

Harry stared groggily down upon a scene that refused to stay still, as if in a gyrating pensieve. A red-skinned boy floated unconscious between two people in lime-green robes. They were waving brass instruments all over his body and muttering strange incantations that were all Greek to Harry. Growing bored, he wandered off, searching for something — though he wasn't sure what. He heard a voice singing and followed the sound. A woman was cradling her baby, singing it a lullaby. Harry drew closer to her; Neville's round happy face smiled back at him.

Elizabeth prowled the corridor outside the Balfour Bane Critical Care Unit on the fourth floor of Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. After an interminable wait, a Healer in lime-green robes emerged, her crisp white headdress bobbing from side-to-side. She wasn't smiling.

"Good morning," she said quietly. "I am Healer Flavia Dee. I need to ask a few questions about how Harry was burned. Is someone able to —"

"*Burned?*" blurts Remus.

"We found him frozen with cold ..." Elizabeth said weakly.

The Healer's smooth brow creased.

"Yes, about that ..." she said, pausing to look around at the large group of people, "... is there a family member I might speak with?"

"I'm Harry's guardian," Remus said, stepping forward, "Lupin, Remus Lupin."

The Healer made a note on her clipboard. "If you could follow me please, Mr Lupin ..."

"My wife ..." he murmured, looking back to Elizabeth.

"Of course," the Healer said kindly, holding her hand out to both of them.

Remus and Elizabeth found Harry floating, unfrozen and unconscious, in the centre of a round, wood-panelled room. Mounted at intervals around the walls were long parchment scrolls charmed to display his life and death signs. A sheet was draped modestly over the boy, hovering a few inches clear of his body, stark-white against the livid red and black of his skin. Healer Dee introduced a second Healer with a thick, straw-coloured beard: Healer-in-Charge Patrick Abercrombie. He gave the distraught Lupins a cursory nod then returned to carefully inspecting Harry's swollen right eye.

"We think Harry froze himself to escape the pain," Healer Dee murmured to the Lupins. "He's in an enchanted sleep right now, a kind of stasis. He can't feel anything. But we do need to know more about his injuries in order to respond appropriately."

Remus stared stupidly at the woman before finding his voice. "I couldn't have been gone more than half an hour. He was going to take a bath. He — he was filling the tub when I left ..."

The Healers exchanged a look.

"A scalding could be consistent with the burns ..." Healer Abercrombie said slowly. "Did you find him in the bath?"

A painful sob escaped Elizabeth's lips.

"No," she said, pulling herself together. "There was some kind of security charm — it summoned Harry to — to a kind of panic room. I — I was the one who tripped the alarm."

"You couldn't have known," Remus said hoarsely. "I didn't know about it either."

"Can you heal him?" Elizabeth begged the Healers.

"We shall do our best, Mrs Lupin," Healer Dee said carefully. "But there's something else: these gashes ..." She gently rotated Harry's body to point them out. "These were made *before* Harry was burned. You see how they are partly sealed over? Do you have any idea how this might have happened?"

Healer Abercrombie put it more bluntly. "Could someone have attacked him *then* thrown him into a scalding bath?"

Elizabeth and Remus gaped in silent horror at the man.

"Was anyone else in the house at the time?" Healer Dee probed more gently.

"Hermione," Remus rasped, dragging his eyes away from Harry's devastated body. "I'll get her."

He returned momentarily, his arm draped around the girl's shoulders. Hermione's eyes were bloodshot and her face ashen. The Healers questioned her but could not learn anything about another intruder.

"He was in the bathroom ..." Hermione repeated, her eyes glazing over as she stared on Harry's almost petrified face. "Pipes ..." she breathed softly. Her eyes widened in alarm. "Pipes!" The four adults stared at the girl. "He went *through* the pipes. He went *through* the boiler! *That's* how he got burned!"

There was a resounding, appalled silence into which Healer Abercrombie said gruffly, "That'd do it."

The discussion shifted towards treatment options. Considering the extent of Harry's injuries, the Healers were recommending a Mercurial Waters bath. Elizabeth's anxiety deepened; she had heard too many horror stories of transmutations performed in years past, causing blindness, sterility, even death, usually at the hands of amateurs using raw mercury in the Waters.

"Mercury?" Remus checked, frowning deeply. "Mercury's pretty toxic, isn't it?"

"But you'd use *philosophical* mercury, wouldn't you?" Hermione said, wringing her hands. Elizabeth shot the girl an approving glance — she knew her stuff.

"But of course," Healer Dee assured them. "We remove the toxins, and Essence of Murtlap and other painkillers are added to the Waters, which greatly reduces the pain of transmutation. It really is the best course of action for returning Harry to full health. I won't lie to you though," she said steadily, "it's not a comfortable experience, but it *is* bearable."

A most horrible of realisations dawned upon the visitors.

"You mean he will be conscious for the treatment?" Remus asked, as appalled as Elizabeth at the idea of reviving a child with such injuries.

Healer Dee winced sympathetically. "Mercurial Waters are powered by a patient's life-force. And accessing that energy is reliant on him exercising his free will in not resisting the transmutations. We need Harry to heal himself."

Remus needed more options.

"Burns can be treated topically," Healer Abercrombie conceded, "but the process would be just as painful. And it won't help the frostbite on his fingers and toes. They'd need to be treated with digit regrowth spells and potions ..." The wizard glanced down at Harry. "Not much fun there, either," he added gruffly. "And then there are these gashes to be treated ... and the blows to his skull. Each injury can be treated individually, but the results would not be as good. And the risk of lasting incapacitation is much greater. Frostbite is actually one of the more difficult injuries to treat. The digits can be regrown using potions, but the tips will never regain the same degree of sensitivity."

The Healers gave the Lupins a moment to think about it, and busied themselves at a worktable full of mortars and pestles and half-filled pelican gourds perspiring over purple flames. Trying not to be too obvious about it, Elizabeth scrutinised the Healers from a distance as they purified transmuting agents. She was relieved to see that they knew what they were doing. Remus tugged her aside.

"You're the potions expert," he murmured hoarsely. "What do you think of this bath option?"

"Do you think he can cope with the pain?" Elizabeth asked him very seriously.

An internal battle waged behind Remus's eyes. At last, he nodded stiffly.

"Then I think it might be the better option for him," she said softly, and Remus nodded again.

Whilst the Healers prepared the bath, Elizabeth reflexively searched the walls for signs of life. Almost at once, she located Harry's Wheel of Anxiety. It was hard to miss: a vivid pie-chart in copper, silver, and gold showing the life-force energy levels in each of his body, mind, and soul. She could see, even from across the room, that his soul was highly charged, but his body ...

"His salts shouldn't be that low, should they?" she ventured to Healer Dee when she could hold her tongue no longer.

"What? Where?" Hermione said urgently, looking helplessly around the walls.

Healer Dee took a horribly long moment before responding.

"I don't wish to alarm you," she said in a carefully calm tone, "but before Harry was revived this morning, he was, well, clinically dead. His heart stopped beating and his soul started leaving his dying body."

Elizabeth's insides, already tied in knots, constricted painfully — as if someone had tied a rubber band around her chest and was pulling tighter and tighter. A Shaman's Death — a Dementor's Kiss would finish the job in an instant!

"His body and soul are still connected," Healer Dee assured the visitors, "but the bond has been severely weakened."

Hermione's swollen eyes darted around desperately, as if she might see Harry's soul float past like a balloon on a string.

"Will the bath heal that, as well?" Remus asked bleakly.

"Harry's soul isn't injured, Mr Lupin," Healer Dee murmured soothingly, "merely highly charged. As his body heals, his soul should return the energy it withdrew."

"And if his body doesn't heal?"

Healer Dee didn't seem to have an answer for that. Elizabeth could tell Remus was trying desperately to hold it together.

"But if he's short on salts, shouldn't you be putting him in a salt bath?" he persisted.

Healer Dee looked at him blankly for a moment. "Oh — I see what you mean. No, no — not table salt — he's low on the Salt of the Philosophers."

Remus nodded tersely though the look he spared to Elizabeth as he turned away confided he had not a clue what that meant.

"The energy keeping your body strong and healthy," Elizabeth murmured to him, nodding to the Wheel of Anxiety, where Harry's soul section was shining sulphurous gold at the expense of his body, which registered barely a glitter of copper-coloured salts. "His soul is sucking up most of his body's life-force."

"And the mind follows wherever the soul goes," Remus said desolately.

"Nearly ready," Healer Abercrombie said, tipping a third cauldron of slippery quicksilver into a sarcophagus filled with Healing Dew.

"There *is* something we could do to make things more comfortable for Harry before we start the treatment," Healer Dee offered hesitantly. "To suppress the pain, a short Imperius Curse —"

"You can't do that!" blurted Hermione.

Healer Dee shifted uncomfortably. "It's a Ministry-approved use for medicinal purposes when —"

"I didn't mean that," said Hermione quickly. "I mean, he'll resist it — he'll throw it off."

Healer Abercrombie regarded the girl sceptically. "He can throw off an Imperius Curse?"

Hermione nodded. "Even Lord Voldemort —" The Healers gasped and Hermione pursed her lips in annoyance. "You-Know-Who, then. Even *he* couldn't hold Harry under."

Elizabeth wasn't the only one to gasp at that.

"Can you be ready to put him to sleep again if he throws it off?" Remus asked.

The Healers nodded and Remus gave his consent, quickly signing several forms Healer Dee handed him.

"I should warn you not to expect Harry to be too lucid," she advised them, "he's had several bad blows to the head."

Remus and Elizabeth watched in tense silence as the Healers prepared to wake Harry up. Elizabeth felt something touching her fingers. Startled, she looked down in at their interlinked hands. When did that happen? So many emotions churned inside her, but she savoured the gentle touch and squeezed his hand back gratefully.

"*Finite Incantatem! Imperio!*" commanded Healer Dee in quick succession, ending the Enchanted Sleep then casting the Unforgivable Curse before Harry could feel any pain.

Slowly, Harry's green eyes blinked open, glazed and empty.

"Harry, my name is Healer Dee. You've been in an accident and you are currently in Saint Mungo's Hospital."

Harry blinked at the woman but said nothing.

"Harry?" Healer Dee prompted gently.

Harry managed a slight moan.

"We're going to take care of your injuries, but we need your help."

Harry blinked slowly, his eyes unfocused.

"We need to place you in a medicinal bath to treat your — Harry, *no*, you have to stay still! — *Harry*, Harry, listen to me!"

Harry's back arched in agony.

"*Morpheo!*" Healer Abercrombie cried, and Harry fell immediately back to sleep.

"Right ..." Healer Dee said unsteadily, smoothing Harry's floating sheet unnecessarily. "Er, right ... perhaps he'd respond better to a familiar face ... Mr Lupin?"

Remus swallowed nervously and stepped closer to Harry whilst Healer Dee recast the spells.

"Harry," she started again, "I want you to listen to your guardian."

"Snuffles ...?" Harry said happily. Hermione stifled a sob.

"Harry, it's Remus," he said hoarsely, searching the boy's eyes for recognition.

"M — Moon?" murmured the boy dazedly. He looked as if he was trying to smile.

His eyes moist, Remus reflexively lifted a hand to Harry's face then pulled it back again, for there was not a single inch of the boy that was safe to touch.

"Yes, son," he said huskily, "it's Moony. How do you feel?"

"Good."

"Harry, I —"

"Where's Mrs Neville?" Harry murmured vaguely.

"Harry, I need you to listen to me ..."

"She's gone," Harry said, sounding mildly confused but not particularly upset.

"Harry, you've been in an accident —"

"Gone ..." Harry repeated distantly.

"Harry, you've been in an accident and you've been badly burned —"

"Moony?"

"Yes, Harry, I'm right here. Listen to me, please. You've been burned and I need you to let the Healers take care of you. They need you to take a bath with medicine to heal you ..."

Harry's head jerked a little. "No — no bath."

"Harry, please," Remus begged, "you have to —"

The boy's eyes grew more focused. His body started to shake.

"I — I won't!" he rasped.

"*Morpheo!*" cried Healer Abercrombie, and Harry fell back to sleep.

The Healers and visitors all looked around at each other despondently.

"Can't really blame him," Remus said shakily, "all things considered."

Hermione wrung her hands.

"May I try?"

"Harry! Harry, look at me, *please* ... it's me ... Hermione."

Hermione's familiar face swam in and out of focus for Harry.

"Lo," he said, feeling vaguely happy for some reason. He tried to raise his hand, but he couldn't quite work out where it was. He felt a little surprised by that but not at all concerned.

"Harry," said Hermione, "you've been hurt ... you've been burned."

"Okay," Harry said dreamily.

Being burned felt wonderful ... all floaty. He was dimly aware of other faces looking down on him, though he didn't know why. Maybe he was in a zoo? He freed a snake from a zoo once. He'd have to tell Frank. Frank would understand. Harry dreamily watched a pair of flickering candles spinning slowly above his head. They twirled around each other ... like dancers ... like Remus and Hestia. Maybe Remus could show him how to dance. Then he could twirl Cho like that.

"Remus?"

"I'm right here, Harry," Remus rasped, leaning over him.

Harry tried to focus on the fuzzy outline of Remus's face.

"You'll teach me?" he asked.

"Of course," Remus whispered soothingly.

Harry pictured himself spinning around the drawing room with Cho. But Cho's hair was all wrong — it was black — shouldn't it be all red and gold, like the flames on the candles? He tried to hold onto the thought, but it slipped away. Hermione was talking again. He had to listen to Hermione.

"Harry, you've been badly burned."

Harry watched with mild curiosity as Hermione very gingerly held up a raw, ugly red hand on a skinny red arm. Harry knew that hand. It belonged to the red snake-baby. But it was too big. The baby must have grown up ... all grown up ...

"This is your hand," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

Harry moved his thumb and was mildly surprised to see the red hand's thumb shake.

"Okay," he agreed dazedly; he must be a snake baby, too. A sudden wave of undefined revulsion surged inside him, but it disappeared just as quickly and he felt all wonderfully floaty again.

"Do you see the black bits?" prompted Hermione.

"Yes."

"Your fingers are hurt — we need to fix your fingers — if we don't, then you won't be able to play the guitar again — or Quidditch. You won't be able to grab the Snitch."

Harry frowned. He liked playing the guitar. And he liked playing Quidditch.

"Fix fingers," he agreed. Yeah, he thought contentedly, that sounded like a good idea.

"Harry, do you remember when you burned your fingers on the stove?"

"Hmmm."

"Well, this is much, much worse than that," said Hermione.

"Worse," agreed Harry.

"Harry, do you trust me?"

"Course I do, silly," he said fondly.

"Harry, there's a way of fixing your fingers, but you might not like it very much. There's a special potion, but you would have to lie down in the potion for it to work."

Harry's misty eyes regarded Hermione affectionately; she always had such crazy ideas.

"Lie down in a potion?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, "lie down in a potion."

"Snake babies go in potions," he observed with a resigned sigh. "But I'm not evil, honest."

"That's right, Harry," Hermione said quickly, "but you *are* hurt and you need to lie down in the potion to get better. Would you like to do that? Would you like to fix your fingers?"

Harry's mind wandered. What music were they playing? Oh yeah, Miss Bones. He watched Hestia and Remus candle-dancing again and hummed along happily.

"Harry, look at me, *please!*" Hermione begged, leaning closer over him. She was trembling as she held up the shrivelled hand again. "Please, Harry, would you like to fix your fingers?"

Harry gazed into Hermione's swollen eyes, her face so close he could see a tear dribbling down her cheek. He thought he should probably be upset about that, but as soon as the thought came into his head, it was gently wiped away again. Curious, he moved one cracked and blackened fingertip to Hermione's cheek. He watched his finger touch the tear, but he couldn't feel it. He thought maybe he should do something about that but the thought was hard to hold onto.

"Why are you crying?" he asked her dreamily.

"Because I want you to get better; I want you to lie down in the potion."

Harry looked at his hand then back to Hermione.

"Kay," he said contentedly.

Hermione'll fix it; she's good at potions.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 14 – Mercurial Waters

Having convinced Harry to accept treatment, Hermione collapsed, faint with relief, into Remus's tight embrace. Still under an Imperius Curse, Harry had no idea what he was in for, which was probably just as well in Elizabeth's opinion. She moved closer and tried to smile encouragingly while the Healers prepared his sarcophagus.

“I know you,” Harry said dreamily. Remus and Hermione broke apart at the sound of his voice.

“Try to rest, Harry,” Elizabeth urged him.

“You’re my frog,” he said happily. He looked confused for a moment. “My frog-mother.”

A sob caught in Elizabeth’s throat.

“That’s right, Harry,” she agreed thickly; she’d be a toad if it kept him happy.

Harry’s head lolled.

“Mirabella?” he called distantly.

Elizabeth looked helplessly at Remus and Hermione. Just as puzzled, they mouthed, “Who?”

“Can’t have a bath without Mirabella,” Harry said dreamily.

“Mirabella isn’t here right now, Harry,” said Hermione. “Maybe you could have a bath with her tomorrow ...”

“Mirabella doesn’t like it when I ignore her,” Harry assured her. “No, indeed.”

His eyes grew less vacant. Hermione shot a frantic look at Remus, who drew his wand and moistened his lips.

“We’ll find her for you, Harry,” Hermione said.

A look of pain crossed Harry’s face but disappeared quickly and he started humming contentedly to himself again.

The Healers half-pushed, half-floated a great marble sarcophagus to the middle of the room and levitated Harry above it. Healer Dee fussed with his sheet, draping it modestly over the edges. Beneath him floated a blanket of toxin-free quicksilver: thick silver globules smothering a cloudy mixture of Healing Dew, Murtlap Essence and other painkillers.

“What are you doing?” Hermione blurted. She clapped a hand across her mouth. “Sorry, sorry.”

Healer Dee shook out a flexible flesh-coloured tube.

“Extendible Nose,” she explained. “Since we need to keep Harry awake, this will allow him to breathe underwater.” She returned to gently fitting Harry with two nostril plugs. “This will help you breathe, Harry,” she told him. She threw a sheepish look to the visitors. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you where we get them from.”

Harry stopped humming long enough to nod wisely and say, “Better than Gillyweed.”

“That’s right, Harry,” Healer Dee said approvingly. “This is much better.”

Hermione smiled weakly. “He used Gillyweed once — to breathe underwater.”

“Got gills and everything,” said Harry.

The Healer smiled slightly. “Well, we don’t need Gillyweed this time — wouldn’t want to confuse things by you sprouting gills and transmuting into a fish, now would we?”

“No gills,” Harry agreed dreamily. “I don’t think Mirabella has gills ... she probably doesn’t need them.”

“No, I wouldn’t think so,” agreed the Healer. She shrugged her shoulders slightly at the others, as if to say, ‘whatever keeps him happy’. She nodded to her colleague and murmured, “Any ears over there, Patrick?”

Healer Abercrombie shook his head and shot a silver arrow from his wand to the door. The communications dart slid through the keyhole. One minute later, a volunteer Apparated into the room. Elizabeth recognised the uniform: white headdress and robes with a lime-green, dragon-hide apron. The girl was holding what looked like an Extendible Ear.

“Over here,” Healer Abercrombie ordered. But the girl remained rooted to the spot, staring in wide-eyed horror at Harry. Remus rushed to the girl.

“Cho, don’t,” he said hoarsely, trying to turn her away from Harry. The girl’s legs gave out and he caught her.

Hermione quickly blocked Harry's view, but Harry was oblivious.

"That'll do, Chang," Healer Abercrombie said gruffly, retrieved the ear. "Run along then."

"What happened?" she begged Remus in a whisper, but Remus had no words. Hermione hurried over.

"Cho, there was a terrible accident, but he's going to be okay," she said firmly, as if to convince herself as much as the other girl.

Elizabeth's heart went out to the girl; it would surely be your worst fear working in a hospital to see a friend come in so badly injured.

"School friend?" Healer Dee murmured.

"Girlfriend," Remus said tightly.

Elizabeth winced sympathetically, as did the Healers, but as sympathetic as they might be, no one was keen to let her anywhere near Harry.

"No, you stay with Harry," Elizabeth murmured to Remus and went to speak with the girls. "Hermione," she called softly, "they need you to help talk Harry through the process ..."

Hermione gratefully extricated herself from a teary Cho.

"Cho, isn't it?" Elizabeth prompted. "I'm so sorry you had to find Harry like this; I know it must be a terrible shock." Cho nodded, doe-eyed and trembling. "My name's Elizabeth. I'm Harry's godmother; you've probably never heard of me —"

"Natalie's aunt?" Cho sniffed through her tears.

"Ah, yes, actually," Elizabeth said, surprised. She gently nudged the girl towards the door. "I know you want to help; do you think you could do something for me?" The girl nodded willingly through her hiccoughs. "Right, well, there's a whole crowd outside waiting to hear how he's doing. Do you think you could give them an update for me?"

Cho nodded again and Elizabeth told her exactly what she should say and to whom — Dumbledore needed to know about the pipes.

"Oh, there's something else: do you happen to know a 'Mirabella'? Harry was asking for her ..."

Elizabeth crossed her fingers, fervently hoping Mirabella wasn't an old girlfriend.

Cho smiled tremulously. "Mirabella's his fish; she's a real sweetie."

Elizabeth nodded numbly. A fish. Could this day possibly get any weirder?

She closed the door after Cho and turned her attention to Harry's immersion. Slowly and carefully the Healers lowered him into the sarcophagus, his Extendible Ear and Nose dangling loosely over the edge. One after another, Elizabeth, Remus, and Hermione bent low to check they could see his head through a twelve-inch porthole window down one end. Harry's red skin stood out in sharp relief against the milky, translucent fluid.

"Can you hear me, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Can you breathe okay?"

A few bubbles escaped Harry's lips. The Healers waited fifteen minutes for the painkillers to dull the sharpest pain before lifting the Imperius Curse. They all watched anxiously for the boy's reaction. Nothing happened at first then the Waters came alive with streaks of quicksilver, as if the bath was home to thousands of fish.

"What's going on?" Remus whispered tensely. "Is he okay?"

"No, this is good," Elizabeth whispered back. "The more active it is the more he's healing. It's when it coagulates at the top that it's doing nothing."

"Harry?" Hermione said fretfully. "Are you okay?"

Harry felt awful. He struggled to clear his addled mind, struggled to put together what was happening to him. He was underwater — he knew that much. It was coming back to him — pieces of it. Something was nibbling at his body, but it wasn't Mirabella ... *Mirabella! Pipes!*

Harry gagged on the water.

"*Harry!*" Hermione's voice cried, loud and clear. "Breathe through your nose, your nose!"

Harry didn't calm down until he found his breath again. He opened his eyes with immense difficulty to see millions of silverfish whirling around his head. Fish and frustration swept all over him. He wanted to know what was going on! Why couldn't they have given him Extendible Lips? He turned in water-slowed motion towards the light.

Elizabeth and the others started when a red hand appeared against the porthole glass. It rested there a moment, as if exhausted, then one black

fingertip drew the outline of something on the glass — just two strokes. The frail finger waited a moment then repeated the symbol. Hermione, sitting cross-legged before the window, redrew it on her thigh.

“Is that a rune?” Elizabeth murmured. Remus shook his head.

“Harry’s not that complex,” said Hermione.

They watched, mystified, as Harry drew the symbol again. Hermione slapped a hand to her forehead.

“Y! He wants to know *why*!”

The red hand offered a feeble thumbs-up.

“Harry, son, it’s Remus,” he said, squatting close to the stone wall of the bath. “Harry, there was a terrible accident. We think you went through the pipes and ...” Remus’s voice cracked and he needed a moment to collect himself.

“Harry,” Hermione jumped in, “we think you went through the boiler and that’s how you got burned.”

The necrotic fingertip moved again. Hermione scribed the letters on her leg then looked up mournfully.

“He says, I know,” she reported. “He wants to know *why*.”

“Good question,” Healer Abercrombie muttered under his breath as he poured more pain-killers into the bath.

Remus covered his face in his hands. Elizabeth looked at him helplessly. This was all her fault. If only she’d waited. But what kind of idiotic security charm would drag Harry through a boiler? And how on earth could they have ever entrusted Harry’s security to *Severus Snape*? And where was Sirius? He would *never* have approved of Snape’s involvement!

They all jumped as Harry punched a fist into the glass. His skin split, releasing a small cloud of blood.

“Harry, calm down!” Hermione shrieked. “*Please*, you’re hurting yourself!”

Harry made the letter ‘Y’ again, and this time a smear of blood in the shape of the letter remained briefly on the glass before dissipating.

“Harry, there was some kind of security charm,” Hermione blurted in a rush. “I don’t know how it was supposed to work, but it obviously failed miserably. Harry, please, *please*, you have to focus on getting better! We can work out what went wrong later — I promise we will. *Please, you have to stay calm!* Do your Occlumency! Anything!”

The red hand withdrew from view and the Waters grew sluggish.

“What’s happening?” Hermione cried in alarm. Healer Dee hustled over from her workbench, frowning slightly.

“The rate of healing will fluctuate throughout the day — that’s to be expected. See if you can keep his mind on positive things, hmmm?”

Hermione stared at the woman as if she had two heads. This was clearly beyond an unreasonable a request.

A timid knock sounded on the door, and Cho slipped back inside the room. Hermione tensed, but Cho was looking a good deal calmer than before. Remus and Elizabeth retreated so the girls could sit together in front of Harry’s window.

“How is he?” Cho whispered to Hermione.

“Oh, he’s pretty frustrated right now,” Hermione said tensely. “You can talk to him, you know.”

“What if I say the wrong thing?”

“Don’t,” Hermione said tersely.

Cho nervously straightened her headdress and drew a deep breath.

“Harry, it’s me, Cho. I’m so sorry you were hurt, but the Healers here are very good. You’re going to get better, I promise!”

The quicksilver accelerated. Hermione sat up straighter and nodded approvingly to Cho, rolling her hand to indicate she should keep talking.

“You’ll be out of there in no time,” Cho continued, her confidence building with the speed of the Waters. “If you just try to stay positive, the healing agents will work that much faster. You could maybe even be healed by teatime, I expect. And remember we have that Harpies’ game on the weekend. You don’t want to miss seeing Gwenog trying to take out Viktor.”

The Mercurial Waters were highly active now. The girls made strained small-talk in falsely bright voices about people they obviously both knew and about recent games and parties that meant nothing to Elizabeth. What *did* mean everything was that Harry was distracted enough by them for the Mercurial Waters to get busy and start healing him. Whilst Cho and Hermione kept Harry entertained, Remus and Elizabeth moved to the edge of the circular room.

“This is just a nightmare,” Remus said weakly, rubbing his hands over his face.

Elizabeth felt as if all the air had been sucked from her lungs.

"I'm so sorry, Remy," she rasped.

"Lizzie, don't, please," he said feebly, pulling her into his arms.

Elizabeth collapsed into her husband's chest, sobbing. For ten long years, she would've given anything to have his arms around her again, but not like this, never like this. Healer Dee drifted towards them.

"Harry is doing quite well right now," she said tactfully, nudging them to the door. "Why don't you take a little break — maybe get a cup of tea? It's going to be a very long day."

The moment Elizabeth and Remus exited the Critical Care Unit, a family of redheads rushed Remus, peppering him with questions. Elizabeth spotted Elphias Doge in the crowd and went over to him. The elderly wizard said nothing; he just kissed Elizabeth's cheeks and gave her a hug, which she returned gratefully. Remus introduced her to the newcomers and she did her best to keep up; there were an awful lot of Weasleys.

The elevator bell rang and they all stopped talking whilst a dishevelled witch dragged a bawling girl and smirking boy of around ten or eleven towards the Day Clinic. The little girl had leeks growing from her ears and didn't seem nearly as pleased about this as the little boy. Elizabeth noticed the Weasley twins retreating behind a scraggly pot plant as the family passed by. Remus checked his watch and turned to Molly Weasley.

"Molly, we were supposed to meet the Grangers for lunch at Covent Garden — they won't know ..."

Molly was busy strangling a wet hankie but nodded earnestly.

"Don't you dare think one bit about that, Remus! We'll take care of everything!" The woman scowled at the pot plant and cried shrilly, "Fred! George!"

"Hello, Elizabeth," Albus Dumbledore said softly.

Elizabeth managed a nod. She couldn't even begin to hazard a guess as to why Dumbledore had a party favour in place of his nose. The paper unfurled a little then re-furled as he breathed in and out; Elizabeth had a suspicion it would toot if he breathed too hard.

"A word, Remus?" he asked quietly, nodding to both of them.

Rather stiffly, Remus motioned to the stairs to the cafeteria. Dumbledore waited until they were seated in a secluded booth by a grimy window before speaking again.

"Remus, I know you want answers," he said evenly, "as do I. Severus and Alastor are trying to get to the bottom of exactly what happened and why. Harry *should* have been safely summoned through specially charmed airspaces throughout the house. The boiler was frozen as part of the Summoning Charm — as a safety precaution. It was designed to freeze once Harry's presence was detected within the cupboard. On its own —"

"*Kreacher's* cupboard!" Remus cut in angrily.

A look of pain washed over Dumbledore's face.

"On its own," he repeated, "it should have made the cupboard chilly but not dangerously so. Just enough to mask Harry's body heat from showing up on certain types of sensors. Harry must have done the rest."

"Snape drove him to this!" Remus snapped. "You *do* realise Harry's heart stopped beating by the time we found him! No one thought to let *me* know about —" Remus's eyes flashed; Elizabeth could tell he was struggling to control himself. "Snape took his sweet time!" he growled. "If it hadn't been for Moody letting us know where he was —"

"And what kind of Summoning Charm was it, anyway," Elizabeth cut in furiously, "to tear him through the *plumbing*?"

For once Dumbledore had no clichés to offer, no platitudes. Remus's breathing grew more ragged as he glared in frustration at the old wizard. He looked very much as if he wanted to rip something to shreds — Dumbledore's fluttering nose, perhaps. Dumbledore gazed back at him sadly.

"Remus, I need to tell you something. When Harry was possessed by Lord Voldemort —"

"Possessed?" Elizabeth gasped. Dumbledore lifted a hand against the interruption.

"Please ... when Harry was possessed, he —" Dumbledore shook his head slightly, "— it is my *belief* there was a point at which he desired death rather than endure any more suffering. I cannot stress enough how very close a thing it was. Today ... I'm afraid we do not know if Harry froze himself accidentally, on reflex, or whether he might have chosen to end his suffering on his own terms."

Remus shoved his lanky hair off his face and locked his fingers behind his head, pressing on his skull as if trying to contain the demon within. The wild look in his eyes dulled as the horrific idea sank in.

"Merlin," he croaked, "we were arguing before I left. I told him he wasn't taking security seriously enough. I told him he needed to be taught a lesson. Oh, God, Lizzie, what if he thought I did this to him — *deliberately*?"

Elizabeth's heart was pounding so hard — surely everyone could hear it. "He just wanted to know, 'why?'"

Remus dropped his head into shaking hands. Elizabeth stared dazedly at the slip of parchment Dumbledore was holding out to her. A chill ran down her spine on reading it:

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

At a nod from Dumbledore, she set the parchment alight; she couldn't even *begin* to think about the war — not here, not now. She watched the message burn to ashes in her fingers.

"Fawkes!" Remus blurted. "He could heal Harry!"

Elizabeth's heart leapt. Dumbledore's phoenix — his healing tears!

Dumbledore's expression was inscrutable.

"I have apprised Fawkes of the situation," he said carefully.

"He'd do anything for you," Remus insisted hoarsely. "Please! It's Harry!"

"I cannot ask him to weep," Dumbledore said softly.

Dumbledore started to excuse himself. Remus jerked to his feet and drew his wand on the silver-haired wizard. Elizabeth gasped, but Dumbledore gazed back at Remus serenely; no fear graced his face. Remus started reeling off a long series of incantations. Dumbledore's party-favour nose quivered and fluttered then finally returned to its normal long and crooked state. What little light was showing in the old man's eyes dimmed completely.

"I have taken the liberty," he said, "of calling upon some old friends to provide protection for Harry whilst he is here — just in case."

"Who?" Elizabeth demanded, jerking to her feet. "Not the *friends* who did such a very good job at the house, I trust?"

"Very old friends," Dumbledore replied softly. "They have been instructed to take orders from only we three. You may dismiss them, of course, should you so desire." The old man looked down at Elizabeth over his half-moon glasses and smiled slightly. "I should like to have a quiet word later about how you managed to enter the house. Mundungus tells me he found you in the drawing room. He says he has no idea how you got there."

Elizabeth said nothing, but Dumbledore didn't seem to expect an answer then and there. So, they don't know about the grandfather clock, she thought, pursing her lips thoughtfully. Sirius was obviously in no hurry to tell the Order about the island. And after what happened, she was not particularly inclined to do so either.

"It *is* good to see you home again, Elizabeth," Dumbledore added kindly. "It has been far too long."

And with swish of his burgundy travelling cloak he was gone. Remus stared desolately into the empty space that had been Dumbledore. Elizabeth watched miserably as his face became a pale, stoical mask.

"You could *never* hurt Harry," she whispered earnestly, tugging at his fingers. "If he knows you at all, then he knows that."

The mask stayed up.

"We should check on him," he said hoarsely, "and get your hand seen to."

Harry fought to hear the voices — girls' voices — if he could just hold onto the sound. The pain wasn't so much sharp as relentless — it never ceased. The fish would ease off one area only to attack another: his arms, his back, his face — even his eyelids. It never completely stopped, not even for a moment. A cruel spasm hit Harry's legs. His body shook and he choked on more of the water.

"Harry! Breathe through your nose! Harry!"

Dragging air through his breathing tubes, he tried to clear his mind — tried to calm down. Hermione kept talking, telling him what to do. Typical, he thought, gritting his teeth against the pain, but her familiar, droning voice — so irritating at times — was a rope tethering him to safety, grounding him in reality when all his other senses made no sense at all.

The pain, it was easing. Harry blearily opened his eyes. The fish were slower now, the water clearer. Exhaling with relief, he saw silvery bubbles float from his mouth. Twisting to the light, he saw shapes outside his window ... faces.

Cho!

Harry was appalled. What was *she* doing here? So he *did* hear her voice before! But she looked wrong, somehow. He squinted, trying to focus. Her hair, it was white, and her robes ... she was all in white, like a swan ...

"Harry? Are you alright?" fretted Cho, her face fuzzy, her white hair swinging stiffly from side to side. "Can you breathe okay?"

Harry dragged a blackened fingertip to the glass.

"What's he doing?" Cho asked Hermione worriedly.

"Hang on," Hermione muttered. Harry could see her tracing his letters on her thigh. "Swan," Hermione said at last.

Cho stared blankly for a moment.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with relief. "Yes, it's me, Harry, it's Cho! I'm right here — right here."

Harry nodded tiredly, the effort of even this small gesture exhausting him. Sleep claimed him and the water stilled.

She was singing again. Harry followed the sound and found her kneeling over her baby. The baby was floating in mid-air, bobbing gently up and down, gurgling happily. Little bubbles popped at the edges of its tiny lips. *Neville*. The name just popped into Harry's head. And Alice. His Alice. His beautiful, wonderful, Alice ... he loved listening to her sing ... he could listen to her sing all day long ...

Elizabeth and Remus returned from the cafeteria, each lost in their own thoughts. Elizabeth sucked in a breath when she saw who was now protecting the CCU. These were no ordinary security guards. Iridescent peacock-blue robes and a single peacock plume, set jauntily in their pointed hats, identified them as Peacock Knights, members of an elite order answerable only to the International Confederation of Wizards, and even then, only by an unspoken agreement of mutual convenience. The Knights were considered incorruptible; they could not be hired, bribed, or otherwise coerced. Their loyalty, once given, was legendary, the Order of the Peacock being the highest chivalric order in the Wizarding World.

"Are they what I think they are?" whispered Remus. Elizabeth nodded dazedly.

The Knights stood at a discreet distance from the CCU, quietly monitoring the floor. Remus and Elizabeth sincerely thanked them and slipped back inside the CCU to find Harry sleeping and the Waters still. Two of the Weasley children had joined Cho and Hermione sitting cross-legged on the floor. They were earnestly debating something.

"But it's Cho's *Patronus!*" Hermione was insisting.

"Look," Ron said dismissively, "he was probably just making a joke about her head thingy."

"Really, Ron," said Hermione exasperatedly, "Harry's *hardly* going to be making jokes at a time like this." She turned to Cho and said, "Patronuses are *really* important to Harry. See if you can conjure yours."

Cho looked hesitantly around the room. The Healers voiced no objection. Nor did Remus.

"Conjuring hope, happiness, and the desire to survive ... sounds like a plan to me," he observed hoarsely.

Cho nodded more confidently. She drew her wand and moistened her lips. "*Expecto Patronum!*!"

A limp silver wisp dribbled from Cho's wand. She screwed up her face in concentration and tried again but with the same inconsequential result.

"He's awake!" cried Hermione.

Remus and Elizabeth snapped to attention, relieved to see the Waters working again.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" cried Cho. The wisp was larger this time but only slightly. "I can usually do it," she said, looking around fretfully.

Harry's ravaged face peered from his porthole. Cho tried again. This time, nothing happened at all. Elizabeth saw Harry shake his head slightly then his face screwed up in pain. Healer Dee conjured her own Patronus for Harry. Her silver faun frolicked around the room but didn't seem of any interest to the lad. The spirit guardian dissipated and the Healer shrugged apologetically. Cho was looking very distressed, now. Healer Dee called her over.

Harry's eyes worriedly tracked Cho rising to her feet.

Shit! She'll see into the bath!

"He looks agitated," fretted Hermione.

Too bloody right, I'm agitated!

Harry thrashed around in the bath, trying to fight free of the charms holding him beneath the surface of the water.

"What's happening?" called a boy's voice.

Harry thrashed about more violently. Ron?

"He doesn't like Cho leaving!" cried another girl.

And Ginny, too? Bloody hell, thought Harry furiously, who else is in here?

"Harry, please!" Hermione cried worriedly. "You have to calm down! Cho! Get back here!" she demanded.

Cho dropped to her knees in front of the porthole.

"Harry, I'm right here!" she assured him. "I'm not going anywhere! I promise!"

Harry slumped in defeat.

Excellent.

After twice passing out from the pain, Harry woke and peered sleepily from his window. He caught Ron's eye and tried to smile. Ron smiled back unconvincingly. Cho was trying to conjure her Patronus again. Harry shook his head and pulled away from the porthole. Sheesh, he thought, can't a bloke make a joke?

He tried to go back to sleep, but the fish had other ideas. After a cruelly brief retreat, they launched another attack, churning up the water, smothering him, eating him alive. He could hear his friends yelling encouragement for him to hold on. Hold on to what, he thought with frustration. He would give anything to be anywhere else right now. He tried to focus on his friends' voices — on anything to get his mind off what was happening to him. The pain started easing a little. Maybe the fish were full ...

He heard Remus tell Hermione he would be 'back soon', then his friends' voices got louder. They sounded angry.

"Did Harry know Lupin was married?" Ron was asking incredulously.

Harry's Extendible Ear picked up. Well, he does now! What the ...

"Of course he knew," Cho said. "I mean, she's his godmother, after all."

"What?" Ron snapped. "Harry doesn't have a godmother!"

"Yes, he does," Hermione said shortly.

"Since when?"

"Since he was Christened, I expect," Hermione replied, flustered.

"And you knew about this?" Ron shot irritably.

"No, I mean, yes — I mean, I only found out today, too, when she turned up at the house."

"Why'd Harry never say anything?" Ron asked. "Are they divorced or something? Where's she been all this time?"

"How should I know, Ron?" Hermione snapped back angrily.

"Will you two *please* just *shut up!*"

Silence fell. Harry rolled towards the porthole and dearly wanted to laugh at the outraged expressions on Ron and Hermione's faces, but he had a feeling he'd choke if he did. Instead, he just offered a weak smile of thanks to Cho, who tried hard to smile back. He closed his eyes, exhausted. Ron and the others kept talking, but Harry was too tired to listen. So, Remus was married — and to Elizabeth, apparently. Was that really his godmother he'd seen earlier? He'd thought he'd been dreaming — he'd been having the weirdest dreams today. Harry recalled Remus saying he pushed someone away a long time ago. And the way he'd reacted when he saw the letter Harry wrote to Elizabeth ... had there been some kind of accident? Had Remus tried to bite her? Had he pushed her away for her own protection? Like he tried to do to him after the full moon? Harry blew a stream of silver bubbles. Natalie said Elizabeth moved away from England ten years ago — and now she's back.

Well, now it gets interesting ...

Harry flew up the steps and burst through the front door. The umbrella stand went flying. He scrambled to his feet, grinning stupidly.

"Mother?" he called out gleefully. He dashed from room to room, giddy with excitement. "Where are you?"

Harry heard footsteps and spun around, sending a china vulture crashing to the ground.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said a cross voice. "Not again! What on earth —"

Harry just laughed. He grabbed his mother's arms and spun her wildly around the parlour.

"She said YES!"

The dream stopped abruptly and Harry blearily blinked open his eyes. Something felt odd, then he realised what it was: air. He wasn't

underwater anymore. He seemed to be hovering over the bath. A bed sheet covered most of his body from view, the sheet floating a few inches above his skin. He looked blearily around the fuzzy room. He could hear birds softly twittering and the walls looked funny, as if they were moving. All his friends were gone.

"He's coming around," said a female voice. "Harry?"

Harry's eyelids were wet cement.

"Are you in any pain, dear?"

Harry was surprised to find he wasn't.

"Bit achy," he said, slurring a little, "s'okay."

"You've been soaking in pain killers for three hours," said the woman, "but they'll wear off soon. We've just finished examining you."

"How my doing?" he slurred.

"Oh, pretty well," she murmured evasively.

Liar, thought Harry. He tried to lift his hand to see for himself, but it wouldn't budge.

"We'll need to get you back into the Waters soon," she said.

"How much longer?" asked Harry.

"Oh, not much longer," she said lightly.

Harry squinted suspiciously at the witch.

"Flavia?" prompted the male Healer, his voice low and authoritative. "Why don't you take your break now?" It sounded more like an order than a suggestion to Harry. "Right," said the man when she had gone. "Harry, my name is Healer Abercrombie. I daresay you have a few questions."

Harry said, "Just tell me the truth, okay?"

The Healer nodded approvingly. "I'll do my best, but first, a few practical matters."

The Healer reached around and held up a urine bottle. Harry nodded; he'd been in hospital often enough to know you never passed up a chance to pee. Several excruciatingly painful minutes later, Harry decided he wasn't going to try *that* again in a hurry. The Healer covered him back up again and made some notes on his clipboard.

"If you feel the need to go while you're in the bath then just go," he said matter-of-factly. "There are charms in place to continuously cleanse the Waters of any impurities."

Harry fervently hoped he wouldn't need to test that out.

"Do you remember what happened to you?" prompted the Healer.

Harry tried to bring the man's face into focus. "Took a bath — ended up in the basement."

"And you went through?"

"The boiler," Harry said flatly. "Yeah, I got that."

The Healer put down his clipboard. "Do you remember what happened after you went through the boiler?"

Bellatrix Lestrange's eyes flashed before Harry's and he shuddered involuntarily.

"Harry?" Healer Abercrombie prompted quietly. "You tell me the truth and I'll do the same. Deal?"

"I think I threw up," said Harry.

The Healer nodded and waited for more, his face unreadable beneath his wild beard and shaggy brows. He reminded Harry of Hagrid.

"I couldn't get out — I ..." Harry fought to keep his voice steady.

"Out of where?"

"The cupboard. They locked me in ... I couldn't ..."

"Who locked you in, Harry?"

"I don't know."

"And after that, Harry? Do you remember what you did then?"

Harry thought of the strange dreams he'd had — then voices, screaming; he had a feeling that might have been him. His breathing grew laboured remembering things he really didn't want to.

"That'll do, lad," Healer Abercrombie said quietly before continuing in a more matter-of-fact tone. "Well, you came in pretty banged up. Second and third degree burns, couple of cracked ribs, skull fractures, frostbite, some nasty gashes —"

"Frostbite?" Harry said weakly.

The Healer levitated Harry's right hand to where he could see it. "It seems you managed to freeze yourself. Not a bad idea, really, all things considered, except you went a bit too far. That's why they call it accidental and uncontrollable magic."

Harry stared, dumbfounded, at his blackened fingertips.

"I did this to myself?" he croaked.

A horrific thought struck him. He remembered talking with Mirabella and the lost guitarist and wishing the bath would swallow him whole. Did he send *himself* down the pipes? No, that was ridiculous! Hermione already said some dodgy security charm went wrong — it was *that*, surely!

"Harry," said Healer Abercrombie, "a wizard's body will sometimes act on pure reflex when under extreme duress. Have you had problems controlling your reflexive magic in the past?"

"Sometimes," Harry admitted.

"Right," said the Healer gruffly. "Well, let's address one problem at a time. Right now we need to get you back into the Mercurial Waters."

Harry looked with despair at the angry burns smothering every inch of him; his skin looked as if it had melted somehow. He fixed his eyes on the ceiling; he didn't want to look at himself, but he could still feel his skin prickling, puckering.

"How much longer?" he asked weakly.

"At this rate you're probably going to be in the Waters all day, maybe into the evening. Bottom line, the more it hurts the faster you are healing. You need to shed your whole skin."

Discarded Basilisk skins in the Chamber of Secrets flashed before Harry's eyes. "Like a snake?"

The Healer's bushy eyes crinkled into what might have been a smile; it was hard to tell under all that facial hair.

"Pretty much," he agreed. "Your skin normally regenerates from the inside out. The quicksilver accelerate that natural process. As dead skin cells come loose, the purification charms will automatically cleanse them from the water." The Healer nodded casually towards Harry's feet and added, "Don't be alarmed if your toes fall off."

Harry blinked; that sounded like something one could justifiably be a bit bothered by!

"What'll happen to them?" he asked.

"Well, that's up to your body, really," Healer Abercrombie murmured, now gingerly inspecting Harry's black fingertips. "It may shed the whole digit and regrow the bone and tissue from scratch, or it may retain the bone and just transmute the damaged flesh. Either way, the prospects for a full recovery are actually quite good."

The Healer seemed to be all eyebrows under his white skullcap. Harry wasn't sure what it was about the man, but he felt he could trust what he said.

"I had to regrow all the bones in my arm once," he offered. "Took all night."

"How did you manage to lose all your bones?" asked the Healer curiously.

"Professor Lockhart ... he tried to heal me when I broke my wrist at Quidditch."

"*Gilderoy Lockhart?*"

"Yeah," said Harry. He remembered, with only the most fleeting twinge of guilt, that Lockhart was a Saint Mungo's resident. "Madam Pomfrey was livid."

The Healer's wild facial hair couldn't camouflage a wry smile.

"I can imagine," he said dryly. He refitted Harry's Extendible Nose and Ear pieces and said, "That feel okay?"

Harry nodded. The Healer reached for a third long tube.

"Extendible Lips?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Ah, no, sorry, I don't think they make lips, but I'll be sure to pass on the suggestion to the manufacturers. This is a drinking tube for Healing Dew

and nutritional supplements. You don't need to keep it in your mouth the whole time — and it'll shut off when you're not using it — but I want you to drink as much fluid as you can; we need to keep you hydrated." The man paused to smile wryly. "Yes, you *can* get dehydrated underwater."

Harry tried to return the smile but felt suddenly woozy.

"Do you know what happened to me?" he asked weakly. "I mean, *why* it happened? Who did this to me?"

Healer Abercrombie stopped what he was doing and gave Harry his full attention.

"I don't know all the details, Harry," he said in his deep calm voice. "From what your guardian told us, it seems some kind of security charm was accidentally tripped, causing you to be summoned to the basement. Your guardian says he didn't know about the charm. I gather you didn't either?"

Harry shook his head slightly. Could Mad-Eye have done this to him? Surely not! Still, Harry preferred that idea than the notion that he might have somehow wished it on himself. He frowned deeply then thought better of that when his forehead started throbbing uncomfortably. He squinted up at the Healer, trying to get him into focus.

"Is my guardian here? Remus Lupin?"

"I believe he and his wife went down to the Day Clinic. Would you like me to call him for you?"

His wife? So it was true, thought Harry. They must be divorced, though, if she went by her maiden name. Why was he always the last to know?

"No, it's okay," he told the Healer, grimacing as his skin began to prickle with pain.

"Painkillers wearing off?" Healer Abercrombie prompted quietly. Harry gave a tight nod. "Time to go back under," decided the Healer. "You probably won't be surfacing again until you're healed. Is there anything else you want to know or say?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "I just want to get it over with."

The Healer nodded and began to lower him into the Waters.

"Hang on!" Harry blurted and the Healer's wand froze. "You're going to keep that sheet over the bath, aren't you?"

Remus led Elizabeth past dozens of bored portraits to the Day Clinic. The portraits picked up a little as they passed but were disappointed in Elizabeth's rather unimpressive injury.

Outside the bustling clinic, Elizabeth turned to Remus and murmured, "I'll be fine. You should go back."

Remus just shook his head and nudged her gently inside.

"Professor Lupin?" said a tall young woman of around twenty, beaming. Remus looked up in surprise.

"Penelope?" He looked at her Saint Mungo's nametag and corrected himself. "Ah, Trainee Healer Clearwater, I should say."

"Penelope's fine," she said. Remus introduced Elizabeth, and the young woman sat Elizabeth down and started making notes on her clipboard. "So, fractures, and a Splinching, too ..."

Elizabeth groaned inwardly when she saw Penelope reach for what looked suspiciously like a Ministry Apparition Injury form. Remus was eying the Ministry form as well.

"Er, Penelope?" he prompted delicately. "That Splinching form looks like an awful lot of work for you to fill in ... er, I don't suppose ..."

Penelope sneaked a glance around to see if anyone was looking. A small smile played on her lips as she silently slid the form out of sight and started unwrapping Elizabeth's bandages.

"Did you know, Mrs Lupin," she said conversationally, "that your husband was responsible for me getting an Outstanding in Defence? I might never have been accepted into Healer Training without that NEWT."

Remus smiled softly at his feet. Elizabeth's heart lifted considerably; it was the first real smile she'd seen on her husband's face since she'd arrived.

"You know, you're my first patient for the day," Penelope offered brightly.

"Oh?" Elizabeth said politely.

"Noon to Midnight," Penelope murmured, peering at Elizabeth's wrist through a magnifying glass.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. Her hand had ached while splinted, but now it was loose she felt sharper pains in her battered knuckles. She tried to take her mind off what Penelope was doing by counting the long tendrils of curly brown hair just visible beneath the woman's white headdress. The curls were so nicely defined ... not fuzzy at all. Elizabeth wondered what potion she used. Beyond Penelope hung a wall poster of a seedy youth; a slogan scrolled diagonally: Just Say NO to Potions!

"Ouch," Elizabeth whispered, flinching involuntarily.

"Just hold still for me ... that's the way," murmured Penelope. Within minutes, the Trainee finished mending Elizabeth's wrist and wrote up a prescription for a Strengthening Solution. "Once a day for three days — just to be safe. And you're all done!"

Elizabeth stared at the potion prescription. Potions could fix anything, couldn't they? So simple — just lie down in a potion. She tried to smile back at the nice young woman, but her eyes prickled with tears instead.

"Mrs Lupin?" Penelope prompted gently. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm sorry — sorry," Elizabeth stammered, feeling stupid. "I'm fine, honestly."

She could feel Remus behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Something flickered past them: a communications dart. The ghostly little bird disappeared into Penelope's ear. The young woman nodded to herself then turned back to the couple before her.

"It can be a bit unsettling having your bones mended," she clucked sympathetically. "Come and have a little lie down for me before you go home."

Elizabeth resisted at first, surrendering when Remus chimed in as well. She'd forgotten what an old fusspot he could be. Penelope led her to the sunny end of the clinic to lay down on a faded velvet daybed.

"Now, I don't want to see you up for a good fifteen minutes! I'll be back soon. I just need to get something ready for Healer Abercrombie."

"Is Harry okay?" Remus asked quickly.

"Who?" Penelope said blankly. "Mrs Lupin, hold on! You need to lie down!"

"Harry Potter," Remus said. "The CCU. We brought him in this morning. Is he alright?"

Penelope looked stunned. "I knew a boy had been brought in with serious burns, but ... oh my goodness." She shook herself back to attention. "Sorry ... look, it's nothing; I just need to prepare some more Murtlap Tentacles for the Healers. But Harry? Here? How do you ...?"

"We're his guardians," said Remus.

Elizabeth shot a grateful look at her husband. Technically, she wasn't Harry's guardian, but she appreciated Remus including her.

"Look, just try to get some rest," Penelope said, smiling feebly at them both. "I'll be back soon."

Elizabeth slumped back into her pillows. The midday sun streamed through a grubby window, and she took her first really good look at her husband. Hard years were etched in the lines of his face, the grey strands in his light-brown hair, the shadows under his eyes. He sank into a chair by her side and reached for her uninjured left hand. His thumb rubbed gently her bare third-finger. Elizabeth's heart ached; it had not escaped her notice he no longer wore his wedding ring, either.

"I never said ..." he whispered hoarsely, "welcome home, Lizzie."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 15 – To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Banished whilst the Healers examined Harry, Elizabeth and the other visitors congregated in the cafeteria, sprawling across several tables pushed up against one of the booths. More members of the House of Weasley joined them; they'd been holding vigil in the corridors, anxious for news.

"He could be doing better," Cho said, shredding a paper napkin. "He's got third degree burns all over—"

Cho broke off, close to tears. Seeing Harry in such terrible pain was fraying everyone's nerves, and he wasn't even *close* to saturation point yet. The Mercurial Waters needed to penetrate every injured inch of Harry's body before the healing could start from the inside out.

"But he's still in the sarcophagus?" Bill Weasley checked. "How's that going?"

"Not great," Hermione admitted. "The hardest part is keeping him awake."

"But why not just let him sleep through it?" Ron challenged the table at large. There was a helpless, angry look in the boy's eye, a look Elizabeth saw too often in young wizards.

"I'm afraid that's not an option, Ron," she said, and went on to explain that anything that dulled the senses — including painkillers, sleep, and depression — slowed absorption rates.

"But ..." Ron started fitfully, "but, I mean, so what if it takes longer?"

Elizabeth didn't have the answer he wanted. "The longer Harry is exposed to the Waters the more — unpredictable — the transmutation becomes."

"What," Ron said, trying to laugh, "like you grow a third eye or something?"

When Elizabeth didn't smile, a weighty silence fell over the table, broken finally by Bill.

"So, what seems to best keep him awake?" he asked.

"It's easier to say what sends him to sleep," Hermione said tightly.

Ron snickered humourlessly. Having run out of things to say, she'd tried reading to Harry from a book one of the Healers gave her on the history of Saint Mungo's.

"At least she's not just sitting there staring at him!" Ginny snapped pointedly.

Ron's retort earned him a clip over the ear from his mother; she really had a remarkable reach. The tension only escalated when the twins revealed Severus Snape's involvement in the failed Summoning, which was hardly helpful in Elizabeth's opinion, especially in a public place. Molly Weasley was of a similar mind and scolded the lot of them.

"I'd've thought you lot might have been more interested in helping heal Harry than in pointing fingers," she declared in a murderous whisper.

The wild look in Ron's eyes turned instantly doleful. The same could not be said for the twins (or their sister), but they did oblige their mother by turning to brainstorming ideas for keeping Harry awake and in healing mode. Satisfied they weren't going to go off and kill anyone — yet, Molly went to organise lunch. Remus joined her.

"Harry seems to be more alert with Cho and the girls ..." Elizabeth suggested to his friends.

Bill chuckled softly. "Why does that not surprise me?"

The Weasley twins were particularly creative, but Elizabeth felt obliged to draw the line at hiring a Mermaid to keep Harry company.

"Cho's the one he wants," Hermione said tightly.

At this declaration, Ginny gave a fair impression of having just sucked on a lemon.

"Maybe," Cho said to Hermione, "but he needs both of us right now."

The two girls exchanged a look more loaded with history than *Six Centuries of Saint Mungo's*. Hermione nodded slowly then seemed to give herself a shake.

"We need a schedule," she decided briskly.

The boys groaned. Cho silenced them with a glare. She passed a quill-pen and notepad to Hermione, who started marking out some kind of timetable. Squinting towards the twins, Cho asked which one was George. Both raised their hands, earning a few groaning laughs from around the table.

"Right," said Cho, finding half a smile. "Did one of you get Mirabella for me?"

One face fell, presumably George's. Elizabeth made a mental note: George, green robes; Fred, blue.

"Er, yeah, about that ..." George pulled a sagging paper bag from within his robes and passed it hand-to-hand down the table. The bag rattled ominously with the unmistakeable sound of small broken pieces. "I didn't want to bring her out in front of Harry ... she, er, she got a bit banged up. I tried to fix her, but ..."

Cho opened the bag and choked back a sob.

"Looks like she went down the pipes with Harry. Found most of her in the boiler but couldn't find her brain ..." George's voice trailed off at the look of horror on Cho's face. "Mad-Eye said he'd keep an eye out for it ..."

Cho's eyes filled with fresh tears and she clutched the bag to her stomach just as Remus reappeared, floating trays of food before him. The boys pounced noisily. Remus tried to keep one of the trays out of Ron's reach.

"Molly's just getting the drinks," he said distractedly, passing out the food. "Who wanted the fish?"

Cho emitted a strangled cry and fled.

Elizabeth glanced towards Cho's girlfriends, expecting one of them to run after her, but Hermione's head was buried in her timetable, and Ginny's arms were folded with determined indifference. Elizabeth made another mental note: Ginny and Cho, not that close. Remus lifted a half-pleading eyebrow to his wife.

"You owe me, Lupin," she growled softly as she passed him on the way out to whichever Saint Mungo's bathroom was sheltering the child.

After a good cry, Cho returned to the cafeteria and Elizabeth left her there with Hermione, practicing her Patronus Charm, and headed downstairs with Remus. The CCU was still closed. Having exhausted the scenic delights of fourth floor corridors, they doubled back and sat on the steps to the cafeteria, apart and silent, divided by the past and a steady trickle of Saint Mungo's staff and visitors.

"He's going to need his glasses," Remus ventured during a lull in the traffic.

Elizabeth didn't trust herself to look at him, didn't want to see the doubt in his eyes that Harry's heart would actually survive his ordeal.

"His own pyjamas, too, I expect," she said, though the chance of his skin being able to support clothes any time soon was growing remote. But Remus knew that.

"I'll get a bag together for him," he said, to which Elizabeth nodded mutely.

Clambering to his feet, he stuffed restless hands into his pockets. Eyes downcast, Elizabeth watched one of his scuffed brown shoes kicking at the lowest step. There was a time when he would have automatically kissed her before taking his leave. Elizabeth found herself wanting to kick the bottom step too.

"Right," he said, digging deeper into his pockets, "I'll be back shortly then."

"Remus," Elizabeth said, looking up at last, "if you get a chance, I left my bag in the drawing room ... could you let Evil loose for me, please?"

Frank the python awoke with a start and looked around blearily. Where did everybody go? Frustrated mewing sounded from somewhere behind him. A man came striding into the room. It was Harry's handler. Frank slithered over to him.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

Remus sidestepped Frank and hurried towards what sounded like one very annoyed feline. Remus crouched down and let the cat out of the bag. A blur of golden fur launched itself at the man, knocking him off his feet. The cat clung to his chest, quivering with fear — or excitement, Frank couldn't quite tell.

Remus settled cross-legged on the floor and tightly cuddled the cat, muttered soothing words and fondling its large ears. Frank had learned to tolerate cats over the years, but they weren't his very favourite kind of pet; that honour definitely went to humans. His current pet, Harry, was such a treasure. Frank rested his head on Remus's knee. The man was all hunched up; he really looked quite distraught.

"Remus?" murmured Frank. "What is it? What's happened?" Frank suddenly got very worried. "Is it Harry?"

But the man was clearly no Parselmouth. And his eyes were moist. Frank knew that that was never a good sign with humans. He slithered into the man's lap and coiled there, waiting.

A knock sounded on the open drawing room door. Remus hurriedly swiped at his eyes before finding his feet. The snake and the cat were set down on the sofa and eyed each other cautiously. Frank didn't speak Kneazle, but he got the message.

'He's mine,' the cat seemed to be saying.

"Fine with me," Frank said, bemused. "Got a thing for werewolves, have you?"

He turned his attention to the doorway, where an old man had his hand on Remus's shoulder. *Dumbledore!* Frank started to slither off the sofa but stopped when the fur-ball sat on him.

"Get off me!" hissed Frank in annoyance, shaking off the cat, but the two men had already disappeared. The Kneazle mewed in disgust and struck a pose of righteous indignation. "Oh, for heaven's sake," grumbled Frank, climbing back up to where Remus had told him to stay put. Remus returned shortly with offerings of food and water.

"Oh, you really shouldn't have," preened Frank, not hungry at all but very pleased, all the same. He wasn't so pleased when he realised the food and drink were for the fur-ball.

Remus slung the python around his neck.

"Come on, Frank," he said, striding from the room and up the stairs. "I'm afraid Harry's had something of an accident. You might not see him for a few days."

"What kind of accident?" quizzed Frank automatically, even though he doubted the man would understand him — not really well. "And why were those awful people attacking Harry's godmother? *Where is my Harry?*"

Remus hesitated at Harry's bedroom door. Then, with Frank still slung around his neck, he entered the room and started throwing things into a bag on the bed. He seemed to be doing fine until he entered the bathroom. He collected Harry's toothbrush, razor, soap, and such, but stopped when he saw Harry's spectacles lying on the edge of the bath. He reached out to pick them up, but his hand shook and they fell into the bath. The man froze. Then Frank felt a jolt as he dropped to his knees. Frank looked from the man to the glasses. It wasn't that far — all Remus had to do was reach out his arm — he had fingers and everything ...

Frank waited but Remus just stared into the bath. Vibrations thudded in the man's chest. He seemed overwhelmed by such a little thing. Frank slid off Remus's shoulders and into the bathtub then slithered over the damp tiles and collected Harry's spectacles in his jaws. He delivered them to Remus, nudging him to get his attention.

"Thank you, Frank," Remus rasped.

"Not at all," Frank murmured, climbing back onto Remus's shoulders. Remus finished getting Harry's bag together and tried to put Frank aside.

"I don't think so!" declared Frank, wrapping himself tightly around the man's neck.

"Frank! Frank, you're choking me!"

"Oh, sorry." Frank loosened his grip — but only a little.

"Frank, please," insisted Remus, trying to extricate himself. "Harry's in hospital. I need you to stay here."

"*Hospital!*" Frank coiled tightly around the man's arm. "People go into hospitals and never come out again! I know things!"

"Frank!" groaned Remus. Breaking free, he tossed the python onto the bed.

"My *last* handler went into hospital," Frank hissed, squirming frantically. "I never saw him again!" He tried to slither into Harry's bag, but Remus kept pulling him back out again.

"*Frank*," moaned Remus, "I don't have time for this!"

"Harry needs me!" Frank hissed. "Who knows *what* those dreadful monsters will do to him! Cut him up! Suck out his brains! Feed him to leeches!"

Remus picked up Frank's squirming body and tried to get him back into his basket. Hedwig hooted drowsily from her perch.

"Look," offered the man, "if Harry's not home tomorrow, then I'll take you to visit him. Deal?"

Frank weaved in the air, thinking. Harry trusted this wolf in sheep's clothing and for some reason so did he. And Frank's instincts rarely led him astray.

"Well, all right," he conceded, nodding. Remus gave him a pat of thanks and turned to leave. "But you take care of him!" called out Frank. "He's worth the effort!"

The afternoon wore on, the twins leading the way in trying to keep Harry awake. They even managed a rather impressive Switching Charm on the heads of Ron and Ginny. All too often, Harry's blistered face would screw up in agony as something particularly nasty happened in his body. The twins' smiles would freeze on their faces, but they'd press on, telling jokes, casting prankish spells on each other's heads — anything they could think of for Harry's amusement.

The Healers continued carefully monitoring his progress, inspecting his charts and making adjustments to the Waters. Elizabeth had to fight down the urge to get in the way and ask *too* many questions. The portraits in the corridors didn't feel the need to show such restraint. Any time anyone left the CCU, the portraits would chase after them, anxious for news; Harry was both hot gossip and a fascinating case study. Inside the CCU his salt-levels continued causing grave concerns. His body just didn't have the strength to stop passing out from the pain.

"Harry's energy is tied up in his soul and no soul is ever keen to be near a body in such physical distress," Healer Dee advised the Lupins soberly.

Elizabeth knew how the poor soul felt.

Trainee Healer Penelope Clearwater was in and out of the CCU quite a bit, armed with fresh supplies for the Healers and words of encouragement for the teenagers. The Weasleys seemed oddly stiff with her at first, though they did warm up a little after she handed around bottles of Butterbeer and blocks of Honeyduke's chocolate — and some much needed coffee.

"Mrs Lupin?"

Elizabeth choked on her coffee. "What? Oh, yes, Cho?"

"I said would you like to come and chat with Harry. It's on Hermione's timetable ..."

Elizabeth stared. "Oh," she said weakly. Surely, she was the *last* person Harry wanted to see right now. She looked to Remus for support, but found him nodding encouragingly instead. Soon, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor with Hermione while the rest of the kids took a break.

"Harry!" called Hermione. "Harry, wake up!" It was getting harder and harder to rouse him. "Harry! Your godmother is here — Mrs Lupin — she wants to say hello."

Harry stirred a little then rolled towards the window. He blinked sleepily at Elizabeth and she gasped softly; was it her imagination or was he trying to smile? To her right, Hermione looked up at her expectantly, trustingly. Elizabeth wished she wouldn't.

"Hello, Harry," she said, fighting to steady her voice. "Er ..." Her mind went blank. What do you say to someone you've tortured half to death? "I — I've just flown in from Liscomb, from Nova Scotia ... ah, I just finished an assignment there ..."

Harry's ravaged face disappeared inside swirling quicksilver.

"What kind of assignment?" prompted Hermione.

"Oh, nothing too interesting, I'm afraid," Elizabeth replied nervously.

Hermione took a sip of Butterbeer and rolled her finger for Elizabeth to keep talking.

"I was just rounding up some mountain trolls."

Hermione sputtered Butterbeer all over Harry's porthole. Elizabeth discreetly Scourgified the window. The Waters swirled faster; Harry didn't seem to mind. With a sheepish smile, Hermione started again.

"Mountain trolls, you were saying? I didn't know there were trolls in Canada."

"There aren't," Elizabeth said, starting to relax, "not normally, at any rate. The tribe was from Aquitania, in south-western France. We don't know how they managed to end up across the Atlantic."

"We?" prompted Hermione.

"I work with the Canadian Ministry of Magic."

"Oh? What division?"

"Law Enforcement — I'm an Auror."

"Really?" Hermione said curiously. "Do Aurors ordinarily hunt trolls?"

"Not often," Elizabeth admitted wryly. "A special treat just for me, I expect."

"Harry's not too bad at taking out mountain trolls either," said Hermione. Harry's Waters started to slow and Hermione's smile faded. "Are you, Harry?" she called loudly into his earpiece. "Right," she continued after checking he was awake, "so I imagine you knew Harry's parents very well?"

"Yes," Elizabeth murmured. Then she remembered she needed to speak up. "Ah, yes, very well, actually. Particularly Lily, of course."

The Waters accelerated. Hermione eyed the porthole thoughtfully.

"Harry never talks about his mother ... his dad sometimes — things he did at school, but not his mum."

The quicksilver was highly active now; Harry must be listening hard. Elizabeth drew a settling breath; he doesn't need you falling apart, she reminded herself sternly.

"Well," she said as brightly as she could manage, "Lily and I became friends when we shared a dormitory at school. I'd never met anyone quite like her. I think at first we were each a bit of a curiosity for the other."

"How so?" asked Hermione.

"Oh ... well, for one thing she was Muggle-born, which I have to say I thought was wonderfully exotic. I'd never met any children from a Muggle family before I met Lily."

"Pure-blood?" prompted Hermione.

"Fraid so," said Elizabeth, smiling reminiscently. "First time I went to the Evans's house, I was like," Elizabeth pulled a shocked face, "whoa! It was like entering another world. It was all so exciting. Lily would tease me mercilessly about how clueless I was about Muggle artefacts. I remember once she — oh, do you by chance know what a Muggle television is?" Hermione nodded. "Well, Lily told me the people in the television would talk back to you, but it was a bit tricky and you had to stand on one foot and hold your arms out just so in order to — what did she call it? — oh yes, to get the right reception!"

Hermione, well into her fourth, mood-enhancing Butterbeer, giggled helplessly for a full minute before asking, "How long did you keep trying?"

"Hours!" moaned Elizabeth. "Lily's sister finally took pity on me. Needless to say, I just couldn't *wait* to take up Muggle Studies!"

Harry's Waters sped up even more. Hermione smiled contentedly.

"Was that his Aunt Petunia?" she asked. "Did you know her, too?" Elizabeth's smile stiffened. "You knew Harry's aunt?" Hermione prompted encouragingly.

Elizabeth sat up straighter. This was not the time for old grudges.

"Yes, actually," she said. "When we were young, Lily and I trailed everywhere after Petunia. I expect we made quite a nuisance of ourselves. I only have a brother, you see, and he's ten years older. I thought Lily was so lucky to have a sister — and a Muggle to boot!" said Elizabeth, putting on an impressed face. "But Petunia didn't seem to mind having her very own little fan club. I remember she even tried to give me a cooking lesson once. I was so fascinated by all those shiny Muggle tools. I never cooked at home, of course." Elizabeth laughed a little. "I can't even *imagine* our house-elves ever letting me anywhere near the kitchen."

Hermione stiffened. "You have house-elves?"

"Me? Oh no — no, they belong to my parents."

"So you don't have any now?"

Elizabeth smiled softly. "I move around too much: no house, no house-elf. Anyway, I can't imagine any self-respecting elf wanting to traipse around the countryside after *me*." Hermione appeared mollified. "Anyway, I was just full of questions about Muggle cooking, but Petunia didn't seem to mind too much. I think she rather liked the attention, actually. And Lily certainly never tried to learn; she was much more likely to be off collecting frog spawn to feed her pet Puffskein."

"Puffskein ..." Hermione murmured, her lips playing with the word, "round and yellow and fluffy — hums a lot when it's happy and has this really long thin tongue?"

"The very one," Elizabeth agreed. "I remember Lily telling me Petunia woke up screaming one night when she found its tongue stuck up her nose."

"Ew!" laughed Hermione.

"I know," said Elizabeth, grinning. "Lily tried to tell her it was just looking for food, but Petunia didn't seem to find that at all comforting. I suspect she wasn't too keen on magical creatures after that little episode — or magic at all, really — much happier in the kitchen surrounded by all her power tools, I think."

"So," said Hermione, "what did Mrs Dursley teach you about cooking?"

Elizabeth grimaced. "Not to over boil a tin of condensed milk."

Hermione burst out laughing. Elizabeth shook her head ruefully.

"Petunia was furious. We were cleaning caramel off the ceiling for days!"

A low snicker sounded from behind. Elizabeth turned and glared at her husband. Remus quickly cleared his throat as if to say, 'Who, me?' Elizabeth turned back to the Waters; they'd been swirling rapidly for a good twenty minutes. She tried to think of another story to amuse Harry.

"Mind you, I got Lily back for the television thing when she came to *my* house in the holidays ..." and here Elizabeth grinned wickedly, "... and she managed to accidentally free my mother's favourite house-elf."

"She didn't!" Hermione cried gleefully.

"She certainly did," Elizabeth assured the girl.

"How'd she do it?"

"Ah, well, we would've been ... oh, thirteen, maybe. I told Lily to be sure to package up her laundry in a potato sack and give it to my mother. Mother, naturally enough, was a tad bemused to be given a sack of potatoes, but she accepted them graciously, of course, and handed them to the nearest house-elf."

"Brilliant!" Hermione chortled happily.

"Mother didn't think so," Elizabeth said, wincing. "She was livid. The house-elf wasn't too impressed either, if I recall."

"What did she do?" Hermione breathed. "Your mother, I mean."

"Do?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

"To Lily."

"Oh, I see. Oh, well, Lily was a guest, so ..." Elizabeth shrugged, "what can you do? Besides, Mother had a pretty fair idea it was really *me* behind it all."

"What happened?" pleaded Hermione.

Elizabeth winced in memory. "I got quite a few lengthy lectures about Muggle-baiting from my parents and some very long and very dirty looks from the other house-elves. And I was never allowed to visit the Evans again."

"That seems harsh ..." Hermione said sympathetically.

"Ah, well, thank you," said Elizabeth, "but you see it wasn't exactly the *first* time I'd caused a bit too much mischief around the house. My parents chose the one punishment they knew would really hurt. And I must admit it did cure me of playing pranks for a good long while."

"Was Lily ever allowed to visit *you* again?" asked Hermione.

"Lily? Oh yes, she came on quite a few of our holidays, actually. Mother never held it against her, although she did sit her down for a long lesson on proper house-elf etiquette."

Elizabeth glanced at Hermione's timetable. It was time for the twins. Elizabeth felt Harry could use a short rest first and let the conversation die down. Harry's weary face drew closer to the window.

"Rest now, Harry," Elizabeth said, trying hard to smile for him.

Harry nodded gratefully and closed half-silvered eyes. The smile slid from Elizabeth's face; if he thought the saturation stage was bad ...

"Would you *please* hold still?"

Full of nervous energy, Harry rocked back and forth on his heels. *Today was the day!*

"Have you got the rings?" he checked as he battled with his cravat.

"Yes, Frank, I've got the rings, I told you ten times already!"

Frank?

Harry stared at his reflection, thoroughly confused. The face in the mirror looked vaguely familiar, but it wasn't his.

Water flooded his throat, choking him.

"Harry!" cried a girl's voice. "Calm down! Breathe through your nose!"

Harry woke from his dream to find piranhas devouring his feet. He screamed pointlessly into the warm water. By now, he knew he wasn't actually being eaten alive by fish, but it sure felt like it. He could hear his friends talking to him, but breathing and hearing at the same time was completely beyond him just at the moment. He tried counting his breaths, struggling to keep them even. He counted off seconds — then minutes — then he lost count. Healer Abercrombie told him the more it hurt the faster he was healing but this was too much — too long. Harry didn't know how much more he could take. He gritted his teeth and silently begged for the pain to stop — if only for a minute ...

A violent spasm shuddered through Harry's wrecked body. He couldn't think; he could barely remember his name. His head felt hot — enormous. His skull was contracting, tighter and tighter. Then it exploded and Harry knew no more.

Elizabeth's heart broke as Harry's tortured faced drifted closer to the window, his eyes dull and unseeing, his jaw clenched tight against the pain. The Waters had been going at speed for nearly an hour. The twins were doing *too* well at keeping him awake.

"It's been too long," Elizabeth whispered to Remus. "He needs a break."

Remus agreed and together they voiced their concern to the Healers. The Healers responded by adding a few drops of painkillers to the Waters. It wasn't nearly enough. Harry was almost at saturation point, the Healers kept saying, and urged them to be patient, but the Lupins insisted. After a brief huddle, the Healers agreed to ten minutes of Enchanted Sleep as soon as Harry's eyes fully silvered. At once, Remus crouched before the porthole, his wand poised, his forehead pressed into the glass, his eyes never leaving Harry's.

"Just a bit longer, son," he begged in a whisper.

Elizabeth couldn't watch; she paced back and forth on the blind side of the bath.

"Morpheo!" declared Remus at last.

Elizabeth dashed around the bath to see Harry's body relax and the Waters still. The fraught visitors relaxed with him and started stretching their legs, all except Remus, who jerked to his feet.

"What's happening?" he cried, real fright in his voice.

All eyes snapped to the porthole. Harry was thrashing about in the water, his eyes closed, his face twisted in torment. The Healers rushed from chart to flapping chart, muttering urgently to each other. This went on for several minutes then it seemed to pass and Harry was sleeping peacefully once more. They could see him very clearly now, his black hair swaying lazily. Whatever was happening, the danger seemed to have passed.

"People don't normally experience anything during an Enchanted Sleep..." Healer Dee said wonderingly.

"Normal" doesn't apply to Harry," Ron said matter-of-factly from the floor.

Healer Abercrombie peeled back the sheet covering the sarcophagus. As expected, the quicksilver lay in a gluggy blanket upon the surface of the water. He swept some away and dropped waterproof candles into the bath the better see Harry's face. Remus and Elizabeth peered inside the bath, their hands clutching the high stone rim. They could see Harry's eyeballs moving beneath blistered eyelids.

"There's nothing happening in his head," Healer Dee insisted, double-checking his charts, "nothing at all."

"Whose head's he in then?" Ron snorted sceptically.

The Healers, Remus, and Elizabeth stared at each other wordlessly, then they all looked back down at Harry. A soft smile played on the boy's split lips.

Whose indeed, Elizabeth thought wonderingly.

When the world stopped spinning, Harry wasn't in his room anymore. Doors and corridors flashed past. Screams pelted him from every direction, other people's minds, other people's pain. The voices were everywhere, pressing in on him, screaming for attention. Soon, he was hopelessly lost, bouncing from one broken soul to another. Amidst the screams, a woman sang sweetly. Harry knew that voice! He raced towards it.

Relief washed over him. He'd found her again! He rushed to her, but she looked straight past him, smiling lovingly at someone else. A man was holding Harry's baby ...

Hang on a minute; Harry didn't have a baby. It was *her* baby, her and her husband's: Frank! Frank Longbottom!

Groggy and confused, Harry felt the newborn pressing against his chest, like a little bird. But it was *Frank* who was holding the baby, not Harry. A great wave of love surged through Harry for the pink-skinned infant. But it wasn't *his* emotion. It was Frank's. It was Frank's love he was feeling — like the way he sometimes sensed Voldemort's feelings. But it was different with Frank, more intimate. Harry felt, heard, even smelled, everything Frank did. Harry figured if he was dreaming, then it was one heck of a dream.

He knew only too well that Frank and Alice Longbottom were long-term residents of Saint Mungo's Hospital. He remembered everything now: Hermione convincing him to get in the bath; Cho trying to conjure her Patronus for him; Elizabeth Ramsay being there, though he was a bit fuzzy about that — and he had an awkward feeling he'd called her a frog. But then again, he also thought he was a freaky snake-baby at one point.

Frank nuzzled the top of his baby's head then pulled back, worried his stubble might be scratchy.

Whoa, thought Harry, how did he know that? Was he possessing Mr Longbottom? Harry grew worried. When Voldemort had possessed him, he'd wanted to die rather than endure the brain splitting agony. Was he hurting Neville's dad? Should he try to get out of his head? Leave the poor man alone with his memories?

A sudden feeling of overwhelming loneliness washed over Harry — and hard. He couldn't quite put it into words, but somehow he knew Frank wasn't minding the company.

Harry's respite was short-lived. Within minutes, his bog-annoying captors woke him up and he was back in his underwater prison. Hours passed with the cycle looping: pain and sleep, pain and sleep, like some Dark amusement ride he couldn't get off.

After passing out for the *n*th time, his mind floated out of his body and hovered above his bath, fuming. He only just noticed his bed sheet was gone and all that lay between him and eternal mortification was a sloppy layer of silver goo! It looked like the Healers were clearing the room. Speechless, Harry watched as each of the girls stand and peer into his bath. It looked like they could only see his messed-up face right now, but who knew how long that blanket of silver gunk would stay where it was supposed to? Outraged, Harry raced off to have a good whinge to Frank

It was very strange — being in the mind of another person, but Harry had been visiting with Frank Longbottom every chance he got. In Frank, he found refuge from the storm of insane souls who called Saint Mungo's home. Neither Harry nor Frank knew what to do at first, but they eventually got a sense of each other. Frank didn't talk in words exactly (either he wouldn't or couldn't), but they managed to communicate reasonably well. Harry would tell Frank things and Harry could feel Frank's emotions in response: happiness, frustration, curiosity — mainly curiosity. In return, Frank would draw up memories of his own to show Harry. For Harry, it was as if he was floating through a Pensieve, being able to see, hear, touch everything in Frank's memory, but, unlike a Pensieve, Harry also felt what Frank was feeling. The doubling up of sensations took some getting used to.

When Harry finally thought to tell Frank who he was, Frank was very surprised and immediately conjured memories of baby Neville, accompanied by feelings of longing. Harry knew exactly what Frank wanted and set about dredging up every good memory of Neville he could think of: Neville standing up to him and Hermione and Ron in first year and earning the House Points that made Gryffindor win the House Cup; Neville receiving compliments from Professor Sprout; Neville turning his Boggart into a handbag-wielding, vulture-hat wearing Severus Snape (Frank couldn't get enough of that one); Neville launching an attack on Malfoy and his goons for rubbishing patients at Saint Mungo's; and all the times Neville had stood up for him, Harry Potter, too.

When Harry returned to Frank this time, he'd run out of things he thought were impressive, and sheepishly moved on to less illustrious moments, such as the infamous Stinksap episode on the Hogwarts Express. Frank was enthralled. He wanted more and more; he couldn't get enough. Harry tried to oblige: Neville making dumb jokes in their dormitory; Neville tripping on his robes; Neville falling over chairs, desks, stairs; Neville treading on Ginny's feet at the Yule Ball. Frank was gleeful. He started conjuring a few schoolboy memories of his own. Harry was delighted; he now knew where Neville got his clumsiness.

Without warning, Harry was underwater again and screaming and choking. The minute he passed out again, he was off seeking Frank. Frank helped him find his way by dreaming of Alice singing. When Harry finally thought to explain the reason for his absences: that he'd been in a near-fatal accident and was taking a long, hot bath, Frank grew alarmed, frantic even. His thoughts grew chaotic as he struggled to make himself understood, but all Harry could discern were random screaming faces, explosions, wand fire, flashes of red and green light ... and Professor Dumbledore shaking his head sorrowfully and saying, "Lost, Frank ... and for all eternity."

A new face appeared — goggle eyed and vacant-looking — Hogwarts' clueless seer, Sibyll Trelawney. Harry wondered if Frank was worried about the prophecy.

"Trelawney?" Harry said. "Erm, yeah, I know about that, it's okay." This piece of news failed to calm Frank one little bit. "Look, can we chat about something else?"

Frank conjured a memory of Alice clutching the throat of her dressing gown.

"Voldemort," she whispered urgently, "is he dead? Is that even possible?"

"Yeah ... not really what I had in mind, Frank. How about I show you some more things with Neville? Have I told you about our first flying lesson? Neville managed to fall off his broom. It was pretty spectacular, actually, broke his wrist and everything."

But Frank was too worked up to continue. His head was full of desperate battles from the old days. Harry felt an enormous surge of hatred when Snape's face appeared amongst the Death Eaters (Harry wasn't too sure if that was from him or Frank). And all the while, he could hear a vicious laugh, a sneering baby-talking voice: *Bellatrix Lestrange!* And amongst all that, repeating over and over, was Albus Dumbledore, shaking his head and saying, "Lost, Frank ... and for all eternity."

"Frank, stop!" ordered Harry. "Please! You can't be thinking about that stuff. It's not good for you."

Harry kept on interrupting Frank's anguished thoughts with positive images of Neville laughing and smiling.

"Frank, tell me about your family again ... tell me about Neville ..."

Frank struggled to calm down, struggled to think happier thoughts. Eventually, he conjured a memory of himself just sitting in an armchair, holding his newborn son tightly in his arms — just thinking. His hands — they seemed so large and rough as he stroked Neville's tiny head, the soft down under his fingertips unbelievably fine. Would he be an Auror, too? Or a Herbologist — like his grandfather? He wanted so desperately to protect him — this little person who needed him so badly. Harry felt Frank's crushing fear something might happen to him — to Alice — leaving Neville alone and unprotected in the world.

Frank fingered Neville's plump cheek and pushed the dark thoughts aside: time enough to worry about that when they went home. They were safe for now; no one would dare attack them here at Hogwarts. His mind turned to dreaming about Neville growing up. How much he yearned to rediscover the world through his little boy's eyes. Frank imagined Neville at three years old, covered in dirt and making mud pies. At seven, they'd make a toy sailboat together and float it on the pond at the bottom of the garden. At ten, he'd be old enough to read some of Frank's favourite novels. At eleven, he'd get his Hogwarts letter. Frank wondered where Neville would be sorted, Gryffindor maybe ... Ravenclaw? He imagined Neville coming of age, of making toasts at his birthday dinner ...

Harry quietly absorbed Frank's thoughts, felt what he felt, shared all his hopes and dream for his newborn son. Harry felt miserable knowing none of this had happened for Frank and Neville — that none of it was ever going to happen. Just like it had never happened for him and his own dad. Frank must have picked up on Harry's thoughts because sharp regret suddenly washed over him.

"It's okay, Frank, really," Harry assured him. "Neville knows you couldn't help how things turned out. Believe me, he knows his dad's a hero. Me, too, I know my dad died trying to save me," Harry told Frank with quiet pride. "I miss Mum and Dad all the time, but I know they were just trying to

protect me."

Harry felt a great wave of sympathy from Frank. Then the man was off searching again. When the next memory started, Harry felt a jolt of surprise. Frank was holding Neville in his arms again, but standing next to him was another man — and another baby.

Harry spun excitedly around Frank's memory, avidly drinking in every detail of James Potter. The way he was carefully holding his tiny black-haired newborn high in his arms — his whole body rocking dreamily from side to side ... his cheek constantly brushing his son's head, pure bliss gracing his face. Harry tried not to think — tried not to do anything to interrupt Frank's memory — he just wanted to live in this moment — nothing else mattered.

"I'm going to need him back now."

Another great surge of emotion tugged at Harry's heart. It was his mother, Lily, followed close behind by Alice.

"Hey," complained James, "I only just got him."

"Yes, darling," Lily said patiently, "but I could smell him from the kitchen. Alice has been *trying* to show me how to stuff a chicken. Disgusting business." She looked at the nappy in her hands then at James, and an impish smile grew on her face. "Why don't *you* change him?"

"Oh. Erm, that's okay," said James. "Why don't I take care of the chicken?"

"I've got to learn *sometime*, James," chided Lily. Her eyes were dancing as she pressed the clean nappy into James's chest. "And so do you."

Alice conjured a changing table and handed Frank a fresh nappy, as well.

"Not *afraid*, are you lads?" said Alice. She turned back to Lily and rolled her eyes. "Three weeks, and Frank *still* hasn't changed a nappy. Can you believe that?"

Lily blurted a happy laugh. Harry had never heard his mother laugh before. He ached to hear it again.

"I assure you, Alice," she said, "James is no better."

Frank and James watched in alarm as the two women practically skipped from the room, leaving them alone and defenceless.

"Right," James said briskly when the two babies were lying side by side on the change table. "Er ..."

The new dads pushed up their sleeves and gingerly discarded their babies' clothes. Strong and decidedly unpleasant odours emerged from the tiny beings. The dads leaned forward a little, screwing up their noses and sniffing suspiciously.

"On three, eh?" suggested James. "One — two — three — arghh! Phaw!"

Harry watched helplessly as urine shot into each dad's face. Fortunately, Frank's mouth was closed, but James got a full burst.

"*Merlin!*" James whipped out his wand and shot water into his mouth, rinsing and spluttering into a nappy bucket.

The babies lay calmly on the change table, kicking out their little legs.

James drew his wand sternly on Harry. "That was seriously out of order, son."

Sixteen-year-old Harry wholeheartedly agreed, but baby Harry just blinked at his father and curled tiny fingers around his mahogany wand, tugging it towards his rosebud lips. James's fierce face melted.

The nappies were peeled back more fully and Harry bitterly regretted being able to receive Frank's sense of smell when a great and malevolent force attacked the man's nose.

"Quick!" ordered James. "Bubble-Headed Charm!"

"Neville! No!" Frank whimpered, as Neville's little feet spread poo all over the place. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Soon, both babies were bobbing in mid air whilst their dads tried to work out the best way to delicately Scourgify them. With teamwork they finally got the job done. James was just trying to wriggle Harry's feet back into his tiny romper suit when Lily and Alice reappeared. They took one look at the scene before them and burst out laughing. Harry looked around sheepishly. Frank and James were still bubble-headed. Soiled nappies and clothes were scattered about and talcum powder was thick upon the air.

"Purgo Puteo!" said Lily. She sniffed at the air and smiled. "All clear."

Frank and James sheepishly popped their bubbles.

"Definitely a charm worth learning," said Frank, inhaling clean, baby-powder scented air.

Lily and Alice reclaimed their floating newborns whilst the men cleared up the battlefield. Harry watched as his mother held him aloft and beamed up at him. Baby Harry responded by drooling on her nose. Laughing happily, Lily nuzzled her face into his stomach. She kept making silly baby talk, but neither of the two Harrys was minding too much.

Abruptly yanked back to his watery reality, Harry groaned pitifully with frustration. He couldn't wait to get back to Frank and, when he did, Frank conjured more memories of the Potters. Happy memories of simple things the Potters and the Longbottoms had done together with their children: playing in the garden; visits to each other's houses; feeding time; bath time; and memories of Sirius and Elizabeth and Remus, too.

"Wands are not for teething, darling," Elizabeth panted, trying without success to dislodge baby Harry's teeth whilst Sirius egged him on, cheerily gripping his own wand in his mouth behind her back (no doubt a game Padfoot often played with his godson when no one was around, Harry thought fondly).

Whilst Harry was deeply grateful for Frank's memories, he knew it would never be enough. Just as with the Mirror of Erised, he knew he would always crave more and more, yet he savoured the memories anyway, knowing he would never get this opportunity again. He had a feeling Frank was making an effort to carefully edit his memories, keeping to simple, happy moments, but Harry didn't mind that at all; he had enough dark memories of his parents to last him a lifetime. Seeing the three Potters happy was starting to fill a little of the aching empty hole in Harry's heart. His thoughts turned to his friend, Neville. If only *Neville* could have these moments with his father, too.

As the memories continued, Harry got the feeling that Frank was editing out more and more, trying to keep the memories light hearted. At first, Harry thought Frank was trying to spare his feelings — not wanting to burden him with dark memories of the first war — but, after a while, he realised that Frank was desperately trying to keep *himself* calm and cheerful. Whenever the memories drifted towards darker events, Frank's thoughts would become more chaotic and his emotions more agitated. Again and again, Dumbledore appeared, shaking his head sadly and saying, "Lost, Frank ... and for all eternity."

Harry tried to calm Frank down with thoughts of Neville: Neville fainting at the sound of Mandrake's screaming; Neville losing his toad; Neville losing his Remembrall, but none of it was working. Harry was getting a very odd reading from Frank; his heart was beating a mile a minute. Then he was gone — just like that. Harry spun around in the darkness.

"Frank!"

A low rumbling started. The rumbling got louder, stronger, like a train approaching from far away. Pulsing, throbbing, waves of remembered pain hit Harry. Voices screamed at him, begging a moment — just a moment. Frantic, Harry tried to repel the attacks, tried to close his mind against the riot of tortured souls, against experiencing their horrors. At last, he broke free only to find himself in hot water again.

"Arrgh !!

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 16 – The Whitening

Trapped within his watery dungeon, Harry fumbled for his drinking tube and sucked thirstily at the sweet liquid. He tried not to look at his fingers; he'd lost the tips of seven of them, three on his left hand, four on his right. His toes felt funny, too, but he couldn't see that far. Using his one remaining finger, he tried to feel his lightning bolt scar, but his face was smothered in squishy scabs and he couldn't tell what was going on. Dispiritedly, his hand drifted to his side. Silverfish swam sluggishly around his body, nibbling only occasionally, which was just fine by him. The pain was more manageable at this rate, though it felt creepily like ants were crawling around inside his skin. He peered glumly from his porthole, watching his so-called friends abandoning him. He needed someone to check for him that Frank Longbottom was okay, but, no, *now* they decided he could have some privacy! Figures in lime-green robes swept past his window, their voices low and serious. He tapped weakly on the glass but couldn't get their attention.

“Just lay still for me, lad,” said a deep male voice.

Harry was dimly aware of fingers reaching down to adjust his nostril plugs, to put the drinking tube back into his mouth, to lift his hands to inspect them. He was ‘desperately low’ on something. His Extendible Ear caught a few words: juniper, melissa, tincture, vitriol, salt. The Healers kept mentioning lots of different salts. Why they didn’t just put him in a saltwater bath, Harry would never know.

While the Healers were with Harry, Molly Weasley tried to take everyone home for dinner. Hermione and Cho flatly refused to leave. The Weasley teens weren’t too keen, either, and only agreed on the condition that they could return later (a decision apparently made easier by the promise of meatballs). Remus, Elizabeth, Hermione, and Cho returned to the cafeteria and sat silently together, each lost in their own thoughts, each making a token effort to eat.

“You just don’t know how much we appreciate you girls being here for Harry,” Remus ventured gratefully. “But it’s been a long day already; you’ll let me know when you’re too tired, won’t you? I’ll see you safely home.”

The girls were quick to assure Remus they wouldn’t *dream* of leaving Harry, not while he needed them so badly. Lost for words, Remus was only able to nod, but the girls understood.

“Mrs Lupin, may I be excused?” Hermione said, nuding her half-eaten dinner aside. “I’d rather wait downstairs.”

Elizabeth nodded and Hermione slid from the booth; Cho joined her. Remus watched them leave then seemed to deflate before Elizabeth’s eyes. She knew he was still torturing himself, still worried that Harry believed he’d been sent down the pipes deliberately in some kind of warped security test. Elizabeth ached to stretch her arms around his slumped shoulders, ached to convince him it couldn’t possibly be so, but hesitated, uncertain of his reaction. Remus drew a deep breath and sat up straighter. The mask was back.

“It’s going too slowly, isn’t it,” he said hoarsely.

Elizabeth nodded miserably. Harry had been in the sarcophagus for nearly nine hours, and the Healer’s estimated he had another seven to go. But sixteen hours far exceeded safe exposure to the Mercurial Waters: twelve hours — thirteen at the very most. Remus suggested removing Harry from the Waters whilst he was sleeping, but the Healers advised against this. Repeated extraction would reduce his saturation levels and increase the risk of infection. It wasn’t even that they could just stop then start again in a few days time. It could be months — years even — before Harry could take a second saturation. He’d already lost several toes and fingertips to the Waters; there was no turning back now.

“Sirius should be here,” Elizabeth whispered, even though she knew very well he couldn’t come out of hiding.

“I know,” Remus said painfully, “but you came ...”

“As soon as I heard,” Elizabeth agreed unthinkingly.

Silence fell for long moments before Remus spoke again.

“I — I didn’t know where I should send the portrait ...”

Elizabeth’s brain registered the words, but they made no sense. “What portrait?”

“In my letter ...” Remus said gently, “I thought I explained — the one of Alphard Black — the one that Sirius wanted you to have ...”

Elizabeth stared. “What letter?”

Remus paled. “The letter. The one I sent to you after Sirius ...” Remus’s breathing grew laboured. “Lizzie, tell me you got my letter. I sent it care of the Canadian Ministry; I didn’t know where you were living.”

Elizabeth’s mind went into overdrive. Harry’s guardian! She thought that was just to get past hospital red-tape.

“I don’t want it!” she blurted stupidly. Oh, God, she thought desperately, not Sirius — let it be anything else!

“Lizzie ... I’m so sorry,” Remus rasped. He reached a hand to her face, but she jerked back — she had to know.

"How?" she whispered.

"The battle at the Ministry," said Remus miserably. "Sirius ... He didn't make it, Lizzie."

Elizabeth's thoughts tripped over themselves. She had to have misunderstood. Sirius was in hiding. This was just a ruse. He was faking his death to fool the Ministry. It had to be. That's why Remus was guardian. They'd go through the motions of executing the Will — try to throw them off.

What?

Remus's hands were cupping her cheeks. He was saying something. His face was so close. She could see tears in his eyes. Remus didn't cry.

"No!" she blurted, backing into a corner of the booth. "No!" she demanded, angry now. She was dimly aware of other diners sneaking curious glances their way.

"Lizzie," Remus begged wretchedly.

He tried to reach out to her again. She frantically pushed him away. There was nothing for him to comfort her about. Sirius wasn't dead — it was just a trick!

"No," she pleaded. Remus wouldn't — couldn't — do this to her. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks and a pair of strong arms succeeded in encircling her shaking body. "No," she whispered over and over, miserable in the knowledge she was wrong.

Remus held her close, his face against hers, their tears mingling. He rocked her gently and kissed her hair.

"How?" Elizabeth moaned.

"Darling, don't," Remus begged, but Elizabeth had to know. He opened his mouth to speak then shook his head. "Look," he whispered hoarsely.

Elizabeth snuffled heavily and raised her wand. "Legilimens!"

Sounds and images flooded her mind. She was in the dingy basement of Black House — the one she remembered. Voices were raised in fear and anger — Sirius arguing, giving orders to Kreacher ... They were at the Ministry, tearing through the halls, searching — more voices — sounds of battle, curses flying — the Department of Mysteries, she recognised the Death Chamber — more furious duelling — children! — *Harry!* — Sirius again — the Archway steps — the black veil ...

"NO!" screamed Elizabeth.

A clattering of dinner trays and falling cutlery sounded around the half-empty cafeteria, as if a child had run through a flock of pigeons and set them to flight. Elizabeth was still in Remus's mind, his devastation compounding her own — Harry screaming in pain ...

The couple stared at each other in mutual despair. Elizabeth was dimly aware of Remus wrapping her again inside his arms. She had no idea how long they sat like that — it might have been two minutes or two hours — she only knew she wanted to stop feeling. The other diners were now studiously ignoring them, gifting them invisibility. It would not have been so in a Canadian hospital; someone would have approached them by now, offering kindly meant assistance. Not one stranger was giving her the barest flicker of acknowledgment, a restraint for which she was deeply grateful.

"You should go home and rest," Remus suggested.

"I'm fine," she lied dully.

"Where are you staying? Your parents'?"

Elizabeth laughed hollowly. As far as she knew, her parents were holidaying in Tahiti. And even if they *were* in town, she would be loath to drop unannounced on their doorstep. They would be full of questions she didn't want to answer — insist on throwing tedious dinner parties to welcome her home.

"I took a room at the Leaky Cauldron on Sunday," Elizabeth told Remus. "I don't know if they held it for me."

"You're welcome to stay at Black House," said Remus, adding quickly, "only if you want to, of course. Harry and I are living there now ... but you probably don't want to ..."

Elizabeth was torn; the house was so loaded with memories of Sirius, and yet she wanted to be close to Harry — and Remus. But could she handle being so close to her husband and yet so far? What kind of idiot would she be, voluntarily torturing herself like that?

"Yes," she whispered before she could stop herself. "That would be good, thank you."

They sat quietly awhile, just holding hands. Elizabeth savoured the undemanding silence. Countless things had drawn her to Remus all those years ago, but it was his gentle stillness, his quiet strength, that could calm and comfort her in a way that no one else ever could. When they left the cafeteria to return downstairs, Elizabeth stopped outside the ladies' bathroom. Remus wanted to wait for her, but Elizabeth gently brushed him away.

"Harry," she said simply; she knew she didn't need to say more.

Remus nodded unhappily and continued down the stairs, looking back over his shoulder until she disappeared into the bathroom. Elizabeth hunched over the sink to splash water over her face and set about calming her mind. It was hard work.

On her return, plodding dully down the rickety stairs, Elizabeth spotted Hermione speaking animatedly with a portrait of old Headmistress and Healer Dilys Derwent. Further down the corridor, Cho was practicing her Patronus Charm. She'd been hard at it all day, but without success. Remus stood nearby, hands in his pockets, offering advice to the girl. They all looked up at the sound of Elizabeth's footfall on the cold marble then returned to what they were doing, all except Remus. He stood straighter and searched her face, no doubt looking for a sign she was falling apart. Elizabeth mentally kicked herself. He didn't deserve that.

"Dumbledore was just here," he offered quietly.

"Did he — have they worked out what happened?"

Remus shrugged dispiritedly. "One problem at a time. Bill Weasley is at the house. He's a Gringotts' Curse-Breaker. If someone tampered with the Summoning Charms —"

Remus broke off at the sound of a loud ding and the sight of two teenage girls spilling from the old iron lift. Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat — Lydia! Hermione and Cho rushed to the visitors, and there were fresh tears and hugs all around. The Peacock Knights lowered their wands and turned back into potted palms.

"Auntie Amelia told us what happened," said the Lydia Bones look-alike. "Hannah's staying with me this week — I hope you don't mind us coming."

Hermione just hugged both girls tightly and mumbled something incoherent that could only be construed as an emphatic 'not at all'.

"How's he doing?" asked the blonde girl worriedly.

"Not great," admitted Cho, "the Healers are with him right now. Hang on a minute ..." Cho beckoned Elizabeth closer. "Mrs Lupin, may I introduce Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott." The girls sneaked curious glances at Remus. He responded by sticking his hands more deeply into his pockets.

"Please, all of you," she murmured, shaking their hands, "call me Elizabeth."

Cho smiled slightly and added for the newcomers, "Elizabeth is Harry's godmother — from Canada."

"Ah," said the girls jointly.

The four girls settled in a little huddle on the floor. Remus and Elizabeth drifted away and sat together on the steps.

"Edgar's niece?" murmured Elizabeth.

"I know," Remus said quietly, "the resemblance is striking."

Edgar Bones and his wife and their three children had been killed during the first war — his parents, too. Susan's physical appearance was heart-breakingly similar to her cousin, Lydia. Or what Lydia might have looked like had she lived beyond her scant thirteen years.

A scream sounded from a distant ward, making Elizabeth start. There'd been odd screams on and off all day, but they seemed more noticeable now that the noise and bustle of the hospital traffic was spent for the day. Her knees to her chest, Elizabeth clamped her hands over her ears. She hated being back here; there were far too many bad memories, especially at night. Remus slid an arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him gratefully.

It wasn't long before the CCU door opened and Penelope waved them back in. The girls held hands and sat together by the bath. Harry was sleeping again. Susan and Hannah gasped painfully when they saw his red, ravaged face — the tubes coming from his ear, his nose, his mouth. They started whispering questions, but Hermione urged them to speak up.

"Harry!" she called loudly. "You need to wake up! Look who's here!"

Harry stirred a little but stayed asleep. Four flaming redheads peaked through the CCU door then tumbled into the room. A noisy melee ensued as the youngsters crowded together on the floor around Harry's window. Harry rolled towards the porthole and blinked blearily, then his eyes widened in shock on seeing Susan smiling tremulously at him — he suddenly seemed very much awake. The Waters started swirling furiously.

"Oh, look," Ginny cried happily. "He's healing a lot now! He must be *really* pleased to see us!"

"He's choking!" Cho yelped. "Harry! Breathe through your nose!"

Harry was incensed to find even *more* girls in his hospital bathroom. He rolled away in disgust and made a half-hearted effort to calm down. He was just so thoroughly sick of it all. Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

"Harry, show me your fingers," ordered Hermione (for about the tenth time, by Harry's reckoning).

Harry tried to lift one leaden hand. He was too tired to bother opening his eyes any more. Between the fish and the candles someone put in the bath, he could barely see more than a few feet away anyway. He finally managed to rest his hand up against the wall of the bath. His fingers were too numb to know, at first, if made it to the glass, but by the sharp intakes of breath, he guessed the newcomers were getting a good view of the blackened stumps of his fingers.

Harry let his hand sag back to his side. He was just so tired. He'd be happy to sleep for the next three days if only they'd let him. His so-called mates kept making huge amounts of noise, with Exploding Snap cards and Gobstones firing off in his ear. The girls were no better; they just sat there, talking and talking and talking. How they could find so many things to talk about was completely beyond Harry. And just when he felt like he might be dropping off to sleep, somebody would yell in his ear again, rousing him awake. But, exhausted as he was, Harry had a second reason for craving slumber: he wanted to check Frank Longbottom was okay.

"What's he doing?" asked Hannah.

"Hang on," muttered Hermione.

Harry painstakingly drew his letters with his thumb.

"Sleep'," translated Hermione. "Oh, Harry, I'm sorry, truly, but we just *can't* let you sleep right now!" Harry groaned inwardly. Hermione preempted his next question. "Harry, they can only keep you in the quicksilver for another few hours, but it might not be enough if you waste time being asleep."

Easy for you to say, Harry thought resentfully. Every atom of his body ached to rest and he was still worried about Frank. He tried to block out the noise and felt himself drifting to sleep. A sharp whistle blew in his ear and Harry jerked awake again.

Right!

Elizabeth jumped as Harry's earpiece flew from the bath and hit Ron smack in his freckled nose.

"Nice," said the redhead sarcastically.

"What's happening?" fretted Hannah. The Waters were slowing.

Healer Dee retrieved the Extendible Ear. She washed it thoroughly then reached into the bath. By the amount of splashing that ensued, she seemed to be having trouble convincing Harry to accept the earpiece again.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said evenly, using a *Sonorus* Charm to send her voice through the water, "but I'll do you a deal: if you can keep the Waters working hard for another half hour, I'll put you to sleep for twenty minutes. Okay?"

The splashing subsided and the Healer quickly reinserted the earpiece. They all leaned forward anxiously as Harry's hand came up against the window. Hermione scribed the letters on her leg. It was very slow going.

"Oh," she said with surprise. "He wants to know if Frank is okay."

"Frank?" George hissed, looking accusingly at Hermione. "Who told him about that?"

"Well, I didn't," she insisted. She looked around the group and there were shrugs all around. Harry's palm thumped impatiently at the window. Hermione looked questioningly at Remus.

"Frank's fine," he murmured. "I checked on him earlier."

"Harry, Frank was a bit woozy," Hermione said soothingly, "but he's fine now. Please don't worry about him."

Harry's hand withdrew from the window and his friends resumed their noisy, nervous chatter. The next time Hermione asked him to show her his fingers the boys burst out laughing.

"Oh honestly, Harry," sniffed Hermione, looking quite put out, "was that *really* necessary?"

The Healers approached Elizabeth and Remus and drew them away from the teenagers. Hermione's head nearly twisted off following them to the edge of the room.

"We need to have a chat about Harry's options," began Healer Dee, careful to keep her voice low. "We'll need to remove him from the Waters within the next two hours."

A thick silence fell. The Waters were swirling rapidly right now, but was it too little, too late?

"And if he's not fully healed?" Remus asked.

"Then we shall need to resort to less comprehensive measures," Healer Abercrombie replied calmly, "creams, potions, and the like. And we'll

need to wait a few weeks to begin secondary treatment — until the excess quicksilver is out of his system.”

Remus crossed his arms grimly over his chest. “Can you make the Waters focus on his fingers first?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way, Mr Lupin,” said Healer Dee. “The Waters heal from the inside out, and from the older to more recent injuries.”

“So, his fingers and toes might actually be the *last* things to heal?” ventured Elizabeth.

The Healers nodded resignedly.

“Why is it taking so long?” asked Remus.

The Healers exchanged a look.

“There may be older, untreated injuries that might have slowed things down a bit,” Healer Dee said carefully.

“It’s also possible the Waters are doing more than healing,” Healer Abercrombie advised bluntly.

Remus stiffened. After sparing a glare for her colleague, Healer Dee quickly assured the Lupins that any side effects of the Divine Mercurial Waters were almost always beneficial.

“What side effects?” Remus asked, directing the question to Healer Abercrombie.

“It varies,” he replied. “Some patients report enhanced sensory perception, a keener sense of smell, enriched colour perception, more highly tuned hearing, that sort of thing. In very rare cases, the Waters can trigger the onset of specific magical powers, but such powers are invariably latent within the patient. The Waters merely accelerate their emergence.”

“I see,” said Remus, his expression outwardly calm.

Elizabeth knew better and cast a quizzical look towards her husband, who shook his head slightly at her, leaving Elizabeth wondering just what power Remus was frightened to death might awaken in Harry. He didn’t know about Lily’s curse — unless Sirius told him. But he couldn’t have ... and even if Sirius had broken the vow, it was a moot point: Petunia Dursley wasn’t dead. Pushing back an idle, unworthy thought, Elizabeth turned her attention back to Remus and the Healers.

“Harry was worried about his pet python,” Remus said. “May we bring him in?”

“Harry’s a Parselmouth, isn’t he?” Healer Abercrombie asked interestedly before moving away. “I don’t see why not — for a little while.”

Elizabeth tried not to look as shocked as she felt, but Remus saw straight through her — he always could.

“Yep,” he said simply in answer to her unspoken scream of ‘Merlin’s Beard! Harry’s a *what*?’

Remus dispatched a reluctant George to fetch the python. As Elizabeth watched him leave, she flexed her bruised wrist and allowed herself a tiny smile. She wasn’t the only one George attacked that morning, and snakes had excellent memories. Elizabeth’s smile faded on realising that Harry would have been dying beneath the boiler at that very moment. She felt physically sick knowing how very close they’d come to losing him — that he was only in this desperate situation at all because of her stupid impatience.

“We still have a few hours,” whispered Remus, slipping his hand into hers.

Elizabeth nodded unsteadily. “A few hours,” she agreed.

Penelope drifted over to them, a beaker of turquoise Strengthening Solution in hand.

“I thought you mightn’t have had a chance to get your own,” she murmured, and waited whilst Elizabeth drank it down. “You know,” she added quietly, “it’s true that this was Harry’s best chance for a full recovery, but it’s not his *only* chance. Harry’s a real fighter; I wouldn’t count him out just yet.” The young woman smiled a little. “I underestimated Harry Potter once and I lost ten Galleons in the process. I’d never make the mistake of betting against him again.”

Frank felt the earth move.

“*You!*” he hissed furiously.

George stopped and held out Frank’s basket at arms length.

“Look,” he said briskly, “I’m sorry I stunned you, but you gave me no choice.”

Frank didn’t want to hear it and told the wretched ram so in no uncertain terms, ending with his most damning condemnation: “You, sir, are no gentleman!”

“Frank!” George moaned, struggling with the angry snake. “Frank! Look, I’m just trying to take you to see Harry!”

Frank froze then recoiled into his basket.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" he demanded impatiently. "Get along then," he ordered majestically. George breathed a sigh of relief and raced down the stairs. "But I'm warning you," hissed Frank, as they jiggled along. "One more 'Hoggy Hoggy Hogwarts' from you and I shan't be responsible!"

Taking a break from the CCU, Elizabeth and Remus stepped outside to find the corridor filled with Order of the Phoenix members holding a silent vigil, dull-eyed and drawn under the dingy lighting. Elizabeth started to smile on seeing a few familiar faces, then fell back, startled, as a black-haired young woman rushed into Remus's arms.

"Remus, I just heard!" she blurted. "I'm so sorry!"

"Hestia, don't," he said weakly, holding her as she convulsed, sobbing against his chest.

The bleak assembly averted its eyes. Suddenly wanting to be anywhere else, Elizabeth retreated back into the CCU and prowled the walls, busying herself checking Harry's charts and casting a professional eye over the teenagers sitting around his porthole. Fred and Ron were gamely cracking jokes in Harry's limp, dangling ear. Hermione and Cho looked just as exhausted. Elizabeth conjured a few pillows and encouraged them to lie down awhile; she knew Harry would need them later. In all likelihood, he would need to be removed from the bath still unhealed and still in pain. Ginny nodded approvingly and plumped a pillow inside her crossed legs. Hermione resisted briefly then sank wearily into Ginny's lap, relaxing a little as she gently stroked her hair. Cho curled up on the floor right beneath Harry's window and was asleep within moments of her head hitting the pillow. Harry drew closer to the window and gazed intently at his slumbering girlfriend, his quicksilver eyes never straying far from her face. Elizabeth swallowed down a burning lump in her throat. He must really care for her.

Harry stared out his porthole at Cho. He was half-hoping someone would try to wake her. Healer Dee, preferably; surely, it was a *lot* more than thirty minutes since she promised him a nap. He tried hard to ignore the pain shooting down his legs and into his feet, but it wasn't easy.

"Harry!" Ginny commanded loudly. "Harry, look up! Look! Over here! We've got a special visitor for you!"

Harry groaned inwardly. He was too tired for this. Better not be another girl, he thought darkly.

Frank peered out of his basket and found himself face to face with — "Arghh!" The python recoiled in horror from the swan. "*Where am I?*" he hissed furiously, rearing up to look around the dark room. "*Where's my Harry?!*"

Frank calmed slightly when he spotted his darling pet, Susan. But she didn't look very happy either. Well, no wonder, he thought sympathetically, sitting right behind the swan! The dove stretched out her hand to stroke him.

"It's all right, Frank," she said, though her voice was shaking a little. "Harry's just behind you — in the bath."

Frank's wedge-shaped head whipped around. Harry was underwater. Frank angled closer; the water looked odd — it was shot with silvery darts. The boy's skin looked funny, too; it was all red and black. Frank watched in shock as Harry blinked and a scab of skin came loose from one of his eyelids, revealing new, pink skin underneath.

"You're *shedding*?" bellowed the serpent incredulously. "All this time I've been so worried and — oh for goodness' sake! All this fuss just because —"

Frank broke off on seeing Harry trying desperately hard not to laugh.

"Don't you *dare* laugh!" Frank ordered angrily. "Lying there in comfort!"

Harry looked appropriately contrite, and Frank, feeling somewhat mollified, sighed theatrically and said, "You would just not *believe* the day I've had!"

Harry's face shook with laughter and he disappeared inside a fury of silvery darts. Frank turned away in disgust. He carefully skirted the slumbering swan and headed straight for his Susan's gentle hands.

"It'll be okay, Frank," murmured Susan, helping him into her lap and stroking his long belly in just the way he liked. "He's very glad to see you."

Frank sighed. "Oh, you precious thing."

The minute Healer Dee finally got around to putting him to sleep, Harry's mind floated straight out of his body. He took a moment to relish the blissful absence of all physical pain. Looking back down over his bath, he felt a second great wave of relief. A young Healer was straightening his bath sheet for him. At least she had some sense. He looked more closely: Penelope Clearwater? She'd been Head Girl with Percy — his girlfriend too. Harry fervently hoped she'd dumped the git by now. Looking around the room, he spotted Frank napping in Susan's lap. Frank hissed a little as he slept, and Harry was sure he heard the word *Hogwarts* in there somewhere. Whilst Frank was one of the few visitors Harry was actually happy to see, he was currently more interested in checking in with a different Frank, Frank Longbottom. Hermione said he was okay, just a

bit woozy. She was talking intently now with Professor Dumbledore, who had just arrived. Harry took another moment to lament the loss of Dumbledore's Jingle-Bells-whistling snout then raced away, intent on finding out what happened to Neville's dad. He'd just completely disappeared on him a few hours before.

Drifting down the dark corridors, Harry listened hard but fruitlessly for the sound of Mrs Longbottom singing. Nightmare voices rose instead and he bid a hasty retreat to his own room. A crowd waited outside. Bill was there, Fleur, Tonks, Molly and Arthur Weasley, Hestia, and Kingsley, too — and some other wizards Harry didn't know. They were dressed in iridescent peacock-blue robes. One of them was speaking with a downcast Mad-Eye Moody.

An invisible soul, even to himself, Harry wondered if Mad-Eye could detect his presence. He zoomed closer and stared straight into his magical eye, but there was no reaction. In fact, Moody's eye wasn't moving at all. Harry wondered if it had got stuck again; it was staring fixedly at the CCU door. Harry glanced at Fleur. He thought he might have seen a flicker of recognition from her but the moment passed and Harry felt he must have imagined it. He was just moving closer to Fleur again when he was distracted by the sound of his own voice. Was he dreaming in the bath as well? Curious, Harry followed the thoughts into a dream of himself on his roof at sunset. He was holding Cho in his arms; he was telling her how beautiful she was — how much he loved her — how he wanted to be with her always ...

Eh?

This was all strange enough, but then it got even weirder when Dream-Harry started reciting poetry. The real Harry grew increasingly confused; the other Harry was using words he didn't even know the meaning of!

Just kiss her, you idiot, he told himself.

At last, he was kissing Cho — but it felt different. With a start Harry realised he was in *Cho's* dream, not his own. Once Harry had got his invisible head around that, he took a good look at himself. Cho's Harry looked different: older, taller, no glasses, his hair even longer and wilder than normal — he was running his fingers through it. *Whoa ... no, Cho* was doing that. He was feeling what *she* was feeling — *her* sense of touch, smell, taste — *her* pleasure when they kissed. The Harry in Cho's dream seemed to know exactly what Cho liked and what she didn't; he seemed to know exactly what to do. Well, that makes one of us, thought the real Harry, fascinated and mortified in equal measure. Fortunately, unlike Frank Longbottom, *Cho* didn't seem to have any idea she had company — not yet, anyway. Harry thought he'd better pull out before she became aware of his presence.

Floating overhead in his room once more, Harry looked down at Cho sleeping on the floor by his bath. She was smiling slightly and hugging a pillow to her chest. Harry found himself dearly wanting to be that pillow. He already figured there was something in the water letting him float around the way he was. He reasoned he might never get a chance like this again — a chance to *really* know what was going on in his girl's head — and besides, he could always blame the bath ...

A little voice in the back of Harry's mind argued sternly against the notion, but curiosity won out and he surrendered himself to a rather unique experience. For one thing, he discovered how strongly Cho felt about him — or at least, how strongly she felt about the Harry in her dream. It was the weirdest sensation, and one that the real Harry found decidedly disconcerting. Cho was feeling things about him that felt far stronger than what he felt about her. The longer this went on, the more bewildered Harry became. He just couldn't connect what Cho was feeling about her dream-Harry with what they had actually had in reality. It almost felt as if she was dreaming of someone else entirely, someone who simply looked like him on the outside.

The dreamscape changed abruptly. Dream-Harry was nowhere to be seen, and Cho was racing through the corridors at school. She was stumbling through the halls, pushing through people going the other way. She was late! She couldn't be late! Panic crushed her chest. The other students kept blocking her — they wouldn't let her pass. Why couldn't they understand? She had to get through!

"Get out of my way!" she screamed.

Peeves swooped and dropped an inkwell on her head.

"You won't find him in here!" he cackled before speeding away.

Harry watched helplessly as Cho tripped and stumbled through the crowd, desperate for escape. Hundreds of ravens came shrieking out of every Hogwarts portrait. They dive bombed Cho, tearing at her clothes — clawing at her ink-stained face.

Then she was airborne, dipping and diving on her broomstick through the castle corridors. She drew her wand and exploded a stained glass window before shooting through it into the open air. An army of ravens tore after her. She hurtled straight for the Quidditch pitch. Two figures lay prone on the grass: one yellow, one red. With a mad flapping of wings and screeching caws, the ravens overtook Cho and savagely attacked the bodies on the grass.

Cho's heart was in her mouth as she fought through the hysterical birds to reach the bodies. She fell on the red one and twisted him around. Harry's burned face stared back at her, his eyes glassy and lifeless.

Cho was racing through the corridors of the school. She was late!

"Get out of my way!" she screamed.

Peeves swooped and dropped an inkwell on her head. "You won't find him here!"

Harry watched miserably as Cho, terrified and helpless, relived the same nightmare. It repeated again and again.

"Cho, stop! Wake up!" called Harry, but Cho couldn't seem to hear his words. Though desperate to help, he wasn't sure what he *could* do. And since he was feeling everything she was feeling, he knew with perfect understanding that she felt completely doomed to failure. He felt the same way when he was dying by Ginny's side in the Chamber of Secrets, but then Fawkes returned to heal him. Fawkes's Phoenix Song always filled him with hope, even in his darkest hours — in the Chamber — in the graveyard ...

That's it, Harry realised, give her a memory! *Thank you, Mr Longbottom!* Harry set about concentrating with all his might on that transcendent, spine-tingle sound — that long beautiful note — the sound of hope.

The ravens relentlessly attacked Cho and the dead bodies of Cedric Diggory and Harry on the grass. Harry concentrated harder. That one note ...

The shrieking stopped. Cho's ink-blackened and bloodied face looked up in wonder. A beautiful note sounded. Cho felt warmth suffuse her body, as if her very bones were vibrating with love and hope. The black ravens turned white and released their victims. Harry kept conjuring his memory. The white ravens turned into swans and soared skywards. Cho looked down at Harry, lying on the grass, and found him smiling back at her, perfectly healed and happy.

Suddenly, Harry was choking on silver fish. He found his breath and twisted to the window to check on Cho. He was awake but she was still sleeping. Concentrating hard, he continued conjuring the memory of Fawkes's song, even though he didn't know if she could hear him any more.

Elizabeth looked up, startled, as Cho woke abruptly. Breathless, the girl scrambled to her feet only to fall over Ginny, who had come back into the room while she was sleeping. Ginny pushed her off, but Cho didn't care — she had the oddest smile on her face. Elizabeth glanced at Harry; he was wearing a matching dopey grin.

"Expecto Patronum!" cried Cho.

They all watched, stunned, as a silver swan shot from Cho's wand. It soared over Harry's sarcophagus and circled the candle-lit room, dipping and diving gracefully amongst the visitors, extinguishing half the candles with great sweeps of its wings. Then it plunged into one end of the sarcophagus. Dazzling beams shot through the porthole window and gaps in the bed sheet. When the Patronus at last dissipated, a single unearthly note sounded in the darkness. It was coming from the bath. The music lifted the hairs on the back of Elizabeth's neck and her heart soared. Everyone was smiling stupidly at each other. Then they recoiled in fright as the white sheet over Harry's bath burst into flames, replaced by a crimson bird with a glittering golden tail.

"Fawkes!" breathed Ron.

Every bone in Harry's body tingled. *Phoenix Song!* He was so dizzy he couldn't tell what was real and what were dreams or memories any more. Through a dense pearly haze, he saw a flash of golden light. Then his head was spinning — or maybe it was his body — or the room ...

The ants were crawling everywhere under his skin, not here and there, as before, but all over and all at once. Layers of skin fell from his body in great chunks. Pain shot from his fingertips, but it was short and sharp, not drawn out, as before. He could deal with short and sharp — anything to get out of his watery grave.

Stunned, Elizabeth watched in awe as Fawkes gave Harry his tears and then vanished again in another burst of flames. Every wall chart madly fluttered and squealed. The Healers sped around the room; they were all smiling — even Healer Abercrombie. The kids were going berserk, jumping up and down and laughing and hugging and crying all over each other. Ron almost cracked Cho in two with his embrace he was so grateful, and the twins were doing some kind of victory dance around the sarcophagus. Remus pulled Elizabeth into his arms and they stood there, trembling with emotion, just holding each other close. The Mercurial Waters glowed pearly white, whipping around Harry's body for a good fifteen minutes before beginning to slow. The visitors looked anxiously towards the Healers. The Healers beamed back at them, announcing that the addition of Phoenix Tears to the Waters had bought Harry a good three hours of solid healing.

"Is he healed now?" Ron begged the Healers.

"Not quite yet," admitted Healer Dee, "but the Tears gave him a huge boost. Not much longer now."

He was going to be okay. Elizabeth couldn't quite believe it. Her knees jellied. Remus caught her and sat her gently back down. The kids begged Professor Dumbledore to summon Fawkes again. The old man's eyes twinkled enigmatically.

"It was not I who called him."

The Waters grew sluggish and the kids pounced on Cho, begging her to 'do it' again. Cho tried to tell them she didn't call the phoenix either, but she was more than willing to conjure her Patronus again. As before, her spirit guardian circled the room then flew straight into the Mercurial Waters. The Waters sped up again, not as much as with the Phoenix Tears, admittedly, but impressive all the same. Each time the Waters slowed, Cho reproduced her Patronus. She was just about to do it again when Harry's face appeared at the window.

Elizabeth gasped when she saw his face — his beautiful, healthy face! He looked desperately tired, but his skin was practically glowing, all bright-pink and healthy, like a newborn infant's. Remus's hand shook with relief — or maybe that was her. Harry smiled encouragingly at Cho and raised his hand to the window. He was still missing two fingertips. Cho nodded and conjured her swan again.

It wasn't much longer before Harry was staring in relieved disbelief at his newly healed digits. The water continued swirling, but Harry wasn't sure what the fish were doing to him. He felt perfectly normal now: his skin, his fingers, his toes — everything. After a deep, settling breath, he reached up to feel his forehead. Bitter disappointment washed over him. Though slightly numb, his fingers had no trouble discerning the outline of his lightning bolt scar.

Harry was taken aback by how much his scar not disappearing was affecting him. He knew he should be happy to get his skin back at all, but if he was honest with himself a big part of him hoped that if the scar disappeared, then maybe he wasn't really the 'chosen one', after all, that maybe Dumbledore and Voldemort had got it wrong. Harry rolled away from the window, his eyes smarting. He suddenly felt more raw than when he had great chunks of skin falling from his body. He tried to blink back the tears then realised where he was, and the tears of bitter disappointment turned to helpless, self-deprecating laughter.

Merlin, I've got to get out of this thing!

He heard the Healers talking; they seemed to think he was about done, too.

"Maybe five minutes more," Healer Dee was saying, "just to be sure." A pair of nostril plugs flew out of the bath. "Or now is good," she decided quickly.

The moment the Healers broke the charm holding Harry underwater, his head shot up, his lungs sucking in air and what felt like half the fish. He coughed and slid about blindly in the slapping wake of the slippery bath. He could hear someone clearing the room. With trembling fingers, he tried to swipe the silver from his mouth, from his eyes. Coughing more silver, he clung wearily to the high edge of the bath for support and looked around irritably. Was it really *such* an impossible task to keep a sheet over a bathtub!

Penelope rushed forward to clean the silver off him. Harry, crouching in the huge bath and suddenly feeling very wide-awake, flatly refused to let a girl do that. Seriously, there was only so much a lad could take!

Healer Abercrombie stepped in and soon Harry was clean, dressed, and lying down in a wonderfully soft (and blessedly dry) bed. The Healers kept fussing over his fingers and toes and eyes, waving their magnifying glasses, tape measures, and tuning forks over every inch of his body. Healer Dee said there was a good deal of residual quicksilver in his body, and that he may continue to feel some side effects for some time. Before Harry could ask the obvious, she patted his hand and said, "I'll just pop outside and let your family know you're okay. Do you feel up to saying goodnight?"

Harry nodded resignedly and as soon as the Healers' backs were turned, he risked a quick inspection of his own beneath the sheets — just to be sure. Harry's feelings of relief were echoed by a huge cheer outside. A few moments later, the door burst open and Harry felt a great thump. All he could see were two blurs: one a flaming red, the other a bushy brown.

"Can't breathe," he rasped.

His best friends pushed off of him, grinning madly. Ron looked happier than Harry had ever seen him. And Hermione, well, Hermione was crying and smiling and scolding and laughing and talking a mile a minute — Harry didn't even bother trying to keep up. He just blinked slowly and tried to smile back at them; he could sense their feelings of enormous joy and relief — literally. He could *really* sense their feelings, as he did with Voldemort. He guessed it must be the quicksilver still in his system.

"Whoa," breathed Ron, "you should see your eyes. And your scar, you can barely see it!"

Harry's head lolled tiredly. As usual, Hermione had all the answers.

"His eyes are saturated with the quicksilver, but the Healers say it's only temporary. His scar is white right now, but I expect it'll darken again when he goes into the sun. Harry, the Healers said you'll need to take sun protection potions for a while to protect your new skin," she added authoritatively.

Harry noticed others standing around the bed — more redheads, Ginny, Fred, George — Susan and Hannah, too — all beaming madly at him. He looked around for Cho, trying to focus his smarting eyes.

"Where's Cho?" he murmured.

Cho stepped forward. She was crying silently but smiling too — smiling and crying. Harry tugged her closer.

"Some Patronus," he rasped in a whisper.

Cho leaned low and tenderly kissed his cheek. "Some teacher," she whispered back.

"Hem, hem!" Ginny declared in her best Umbridge voice. "So much for your lifetime snogging ban!"

The others laughed and Harry and Cho smiled reluctantly.

"Right!" Fred declared, clapping his hands and turning on the rest of the group. "Come on, come on — nothing to see!"

"Move along, move along!" George agreed, winking at Harry and joining his twin in pushing the others out the door. "Man needs his rest!"

The group left noisily and reluctantly, grinning and waving. Harry and Cho stared at each other in the now silent room. Harry could just make out her eyes glistening in the candlelight as he fingered her now crumpled headdress.

"You're going to make an amazing Healer," he said gratefully.

Cho quickly shook her head. "It was the phoenix you called, not me."

Harry couldn't suppress a yawn. "What ph-phoenix? Did Fawkes come?"

Cho looked at him intently. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, but you need to rest now."

"You heard me then?"

"I heard you," she whispered. Her eyes were shining as she stroked his hair. "We'll talk tomorrow. You need to sleep now."

"You, too," Harry returned sleepily. "No more ravens ..."

Cho sucked in a breath. "Right," she agreed unsteadily. She leant over and kissed him again. Harry tasted the familiar salt of her tears. "Sleep well," she whispered. "I'll see you in the morning, I promise."

Remus and Elizabeth slipped back inside the CCU to find Harry pale but blessedly healthy. The Healers had pulled the blankets away to check his feet, and Elizabeth, for the second time in her life, found herself carefully counting the toes of Lily's baby. He appeared to be sleeping and Elizabeth and Remus started to leave again when he called out drowsily to Remus. Elizabeth stayed out of sight as Remus went to talk with the boy, partly because she didn't want to intrude on their time, and partly because she had no idea how she could begin to apologise for all she had put him through.

"How are you feeling?" Remus murmured as he pulled the blankets neatly back over Harry's feet.

"Fine," Harry replied wearily. "Remus, how could you let them do that to me?"

Stricken, Remus blurted at once, "Harry, I didn't, I *swear* to you, I didn't know anything about it. *Please*, you have to believe that! I would never — I could *never* do that to you!"

Harry stared, clearly baffled. "What are you going on about?"

It was Remus's turn to look confused. "The Summoning Charm — the boiler — you think I did it to you ..."

Harry's black brows shot up in surprise. Then he frowned deeply and motioned for Remus to come closer — closer still ...

Harry suddenly clipped Remus weakly across the back of his head.

"*Idiot!*" he muttered crossly. "Of course you didn't do it. Just how daft do you think I am? You go weak at the knees if I get so much as a black eye! I was only worried whether you'd *find* me in time!"

The look of relief and bewilderment on Remus's face was almost comical. "But you said ..."

"The *girls!*!" moaned Harry, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Why on earth did you have to let *girls* in here? I'm lying there starkers in the bath and they come traipsing in and out like they own the place! I mean, seriously, what kind of guardian lets — what? Why are you laughing? Shut up! This is serious! Cripes, Moony, get off me!"

"Er, Remus?" said Elizabeth, feeling a little giddy herself. "Dear? I think you're choking him ..."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 17 – Traitorous Servants

Elizabeth gazed dazedly around Saint Mungo's fourth floor corridor, the air abuzz with the euphoria of Harry's recovery, everyone laughing and kissing and hugging each other. Time now, she thought resignedly, to find out what caused the tragedy in the first place.

“Might have known you'd find a way,” Mad-Eye Moody growled by way of hello.

Elizabeth smiled softly at her old mentor's familiar, gnarled face. “It's good to see you too, Alastor.”

“Don't suppose you'd care to let me in on exactly *how* you managed to get past the you-know-what?”

“No.”

“Didn't think so.”

“No offence.”

“None taken,” Moody grunted, shuffling away. “I wouldn't tell me either.”

Elizabeth spotted Remus speaking with the young woman he'd been comforting earlier. Her cheeks were now glowing with happiness and her blue eyes were surely far too wide and bright for this hour of the night. There ought to be a law about that sort of thing, Elizabeth thought dully. She moved over to them, determined to be polite.

“Hello,” she said gamely. Remus's smile broadened.

“Ah, Elizabeth, this is Hestia, Hestia Jones,” he said, and the two women shook hands. “Elizabeth is Harry's godmother,” Remus told Hestia, who nodded sagely. Elizabeth forced a smile. So, it wasn't ‘Elizabeth is my wife’ any more, then.

“I'll see you back at the house,” Hestia said to Remus, kissing his cheek. “Just give me an hour — maybe two.”

“She and Mad-Eye have an idea they want to test,” Remus explained, as Hestia rushed away. “It's a bit of a long shot, but they seem to have tried everything else.”

“Am I coming with you?” piped up a happy young voice.

Elizabeth, Remus, and Hermione made their way back to Grimmauld Place by the Muggle London underground. Elizabeth had no problem with this; she was in no great hurry to return to Sirius's house. Mad-Eye Moody met them at the door, his oculus spinning.

“Get in, get in,” he growled without preamble. “We're not quite there yet. Give us an hour. Still looking for a brain.”

Upstairs, in a brand-new kitchen, photographs lay scattered across the dining table betwixt bowls of fruit and half-eaten loaves of bread. A cork noticeboard broadcast messages, shopping lists, exam results. It all looked so — so *normal*. Elizabeth was hard-pressed to remember what the room had originally been used for. Some salon or other, she supposed. Hestia must have renovated the rest of the house, too. From what Elizabeth had seen, she had to admit the witch had style.

Still on a high from Harry's recovery, Hermione flopped into a chair and exhaled a deep, happy sigh.

“I just can't believe he's all healed. I mean, Harry's been in some terrible scrapes before, but —”

She broke off at a scratching on the door.

“Ah, that would be Evil,” said Elizabeth. Sure enough, when she re-opened door, a golden blur shot past her and leapt straight into Remus's arms. “Fickle beast,” Elizabeth sniffed disdainfully as she edged past them to make the coffee. “So well-named.”

Remus cuddled Evil to his chest.

“Evil? Is that your name?” cooed Hermione, stroking the Kneazle's golden fur. “Aren't you *gorgeous*?”

Remus lifted an eyebrow. Elizabeth didn't blame him; she loved Evil dearly, but Kneazles were not considered the prettiest of felines. Hermione continued petting Evil, earning soft purrs for her efforts, but he remained firmly stuck to Remus's chest.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” Hermione purred.

“An old man, actually,” answered Remus fondly. “He must be, what do you reckon, Lizzie, twenty-years old?”

“You found him,” Elizabeth returned lightly. “He was a kitten then, wasn't he?”

“What do you mean *found* him?” said Hermione, tickling Evil's ears. “Someone didn't abandon you, did they?”

“I'm afraid so,” said Remus. “This would've been in, ah — sixth year, I think it was. Someone dumped a whole litter in the Forbidden Forest.”

Half a dozen kittens were never going to last too long in there. Prongs and Padfoot helped me chase off a couple of wolves, but this little lad was the only one we were able to save. I found him under his dead siblings. Poor little thing — half-starved to death, weren't you? You were hardly bigger than Wormtail."

"That's horrible!" Hermione cried.

Elizabeth shot a warning look to her husband. He was being shockingly indiscreet.

"Don't fret, Lizzie," Remus said, catching the look, "Hermione knows all about my *lunar* lifestyle and all my furry little friends." Remus grinned at Hermione. "It took you, what, all of *five minutes* to discover I was a werewolf when I was teaching at Hogwarts."

"I wouldn't say *five* minutes," Hermione said, letting Evil lick her fingers, "ten, fifteen, maybe."

Elizabeth frowned at Remus. "You're not teaching at Hogwarts any more?"

"Nope," Remus replied in that horribly cheerful, matter-of-fact way he had, "that's all behind me now. And thanks to the *Daily Prophet*, I am now properly 'out' as it were. I daresay it wasn't newsworthy enough for the Canadian press."

Elizabeth's heart sank somewhere past her feet. It had been hard enough for Remus to live within the bigotry of their world when his condition was a relatively private matter.

"But wasn't Evil scared of you?" Hermione pressed. "When you found him, I mean. Weren't you all — you know — *grrr...*"

"Oh, right," Remus said, turning back to Hermione. "I imagine he sensed I wasn't going to hurt him. Kneazles are highly attuned to such things. He just crawled up onto my back and wouldn't let go." Remus looked down affectionately at the feline nestling close to his heart. "Just like now, you big sook." Evil's thin, tufted tail reared up and whacked Remus in the ear. "Yes, I probably deserved that," Remus grimaced, cuddling Evil closer.

Yawning happily, Hermione elected to retire; it was pushing one in the morning.

Remus followed the girl out, saying over his shoulder to Elizabeth, "I'll just check if Hestia needs anything. Back in a tick."

While Elizabeth waited, she sneaked a look at the photos spread across the kitchen table — party photos, it seemed. A photo of Remus caught her eye. He was dancing — swing dancing — with Hestia. They looked so happy, smiling and laughing. Elizabeth discarded the photo and sipped forlornly at her coffee. She had no reason to reproach Remus for moving on. He made it very clear when they parted that there was no hope of them ever getting back together again. And yet ... and yet today it had almost felt like old times, the way he held her, comforted her.

"How's Hestia doing?" she asked quietly when he reappeared.

"She and Alastor'll be a little while yet," he replied. "Come sit down; you must be exhausted."

Taking their coffees, they headed for the drawing room, where Elizabeth took one look at the damaged armchairs and felt her heart sinking even further.

"Maybe the library," suggested Remus, tugging her back out of the room.

Downstairs, she inhaled deeply of air that was slightly musty from keeping company with centuries' of old tomes. They sat facing each other across a Chesterfield sofa. Evil lay curled in Remus's lap; he wasn't going anywhere. Remus reached a fingertip to brush the back of Elizabeth's hand.

"Thank you for inventing the Wolfsbane," he said in a low voice. "You saved my life."

Elizabeth was utterly undone. Remus spilled Evil to the floor and pulled her into his arms, where she crumpled, sobbing into his shoulder. All the years, all the sleepless nights — the endless experiments, the endless failures — searching through every ancient library, tracking down every false lead — never giving up hope, even when everyone said she was wasting her time. She'd do it all again in a heartbeat to hear those words.

"I know," he said thickly, stroking her hair, "I know."

When she'd calmed down enough, Remus poured them a pair of brandies, and they sat apart again, the silence thickening.

"Where should we start?" he ventured.

Elizabeth set down her brandy balloon and rested a hot cheek against the cool leather. Where, indeed, she thought sadly. Tell me why you really left me, tell me you don't love me, tell me why your arms aren't surrounding me so tightly I don't know where I stop and you begin.

"Tell me about Sirius," she said instead.

An hour later, Elizabeth shook her head numbly. Tell me about Sirius. How could four little words explode into such an epic tragedy? For a whole year Dumbledore knew Voldemort was plotting to get at Harry and the prophecy. A sudden, unreasoning wave of anger surged within Elizabeth.

"How could you not tell me about all this before now?" she blurted accusingly.

Remus didn't answer for several long moments; his eyes searched the bookshelves, as if an answer lurked there, just out of reach.

"I— I knew if I did ... I knew — I was afraid you'd come back."

The weight that had been steadily dragging Elizabeth down multiplied ten-fold.

"I see," she said.

"Lizzie, it's not what you —"

"Don't!" Elizabeth tried to blink back the tears, tried to laugh it off. "Walked straight into that one, didn't I?" She jerked unsteadily to her feet and stared at the ceiling. "Where's Moody? They must be finished by now, surely."

A knock sounded on the door. Moody's gnarled visage followed. Elizabeth had a feeling he'd been sitting outside, just waiting for them to finish.

Remus raked a frustrated hand through his hair. "Alastor, could you give us a minute?"

"Any progress?" Elizabeth said tightly.

Moody's electric-blue eye swivelled between the pair.

"We think we may have cracked it," he said gruffly.

On the top floor of the mansion, they found a very pale Hestia sitting on the steps. Elizabeth slapped a hand across her mouth, nauseated. Beside Hestia lay a wet test-dummy, shredded and broken beyond recognition. Remus yanked Elizabeth away and into a darkened bedroom.

"Why don't you lie down for a bit while I check this out?" he said. "That's the way."

Elizabeth didn't have the heart to object. She sank onto what she dearly hoped wasn't Sirius's bed and clutched at her churning stomach. It was all too much; she squeezed shut her eyes against having to think or feel or know any more. She felt Remus push her towards a pillow, felt him drape something over her, heard him whisper what he'd whispered ten years before:

"Evil, take care of Lizzie."

Harry had barely shut his eyes on his visitors when the Healers once again invaded his room. He was being handed over to the midnight shift. The new Healers kept poking and prodding him and asking Healer Dee lots of technical questions. Harry didn't know why they bothered, he felt fine, just dead tired. He tried to tell them this, hoping they'd take the hint and just let him go to sleep.

"A Shaman's Death is nothing to take lightly, Mr Potter," said one of the Healers disapprovingly.

Harry tried yawning very obviously. "A what?"

"When you died this morning," offered a young Healer helpfully.

"WHAT?" yelped Harry.

"Thank you, Donna," scowled Healer Dee sternly.

"What? What did she say? What do you mean: *died!* I am *not* dead!" Harry declared vehemently.

"Harry, hold on — you need to lie down!" Healer Dee said, holding him down. "Please, everything is fine now. There was a point, just for a few minutes, when your heart stopped beating. This morning — at the scene of the accident — you were revived, of course, but there are some side effects we need to manage very carefully —"

"What kind of side effects?"

"Harry, I don't want you to worry —"

"What side effects?" demanded Harry. "What aren't you telling me? Where's Healer Abercrombie? Where's Remus?"

"Harry, calm down — please. Truly, it's very late. I promise we'll answer all of your questions in the morning, but right now, you need to sleep."

"It's a simple question," he said stubbornly. "What side-effects?"

Healer Dee exhaled a small, worried sigh.

"Harry, just at the moment your soul has become somewhat disconnected from your body. Everything is still there," she said quickly at the look of horror on Harry's face, "but one side effect is a remote, very remote, possibility that your mind might wander off. In *extreme* cases, there's a risk that if your mind wanders too far, then you may lose your way back to your body." She stopped and looked anxiously at him. "But the disconnection will resolve itself as you regain your bodily strength. Do you understand, Harry? Harry?"

Harry nodded numbly. Died? Now he'd done everything!

"But what if," he started, then his voice drifted off helplessly; he wished Remus hadn't left. "What if my mind does get lost — what would happen to me — to my body?"

Most of the Healers became very interested in their clipboards. Healer Dee took a moment to smooth Harry's brow. Harry wished she wouldn't.

"Harry, even when separated from your body," she said gently, "your soul retains an imprint of your body's memory, and your body a sliver of your soul. Every part of your being is intimately connected, you see, even over the greatest distances. Truly, sweetheart, one part of your being will not easily surrender its claim on the other."

"What about this Shaman's Death thing?" Harry insisted.

Healer Dee cast a dark look towards Donna, who busied herself scrubbing the sarcophagus.

"Harry," she said delicately, turning back to him, "when a wizard dies, he surrenders his body's life force to his soul, and this process started when your heart stopped beating, but you *were* resuscitated in time. A Shaman's Death takes a little while to complete, several days or weeks even. The Shaman must decide whether to stay bound in the earthly realm, as a ghost, or whether to transcend to whatever is beyond. As I understand it, it's a very confusing time."

Harry could vouch for that. When the time came, he knew what *his* choice would be. And he had *no* intention of hanging out in a toilet for eternity!

The Healers debated amongst themselves whether or not to let their patient sleep naturally; they seemed worried where his dreams might take him. They finally decided on a dreamless sleeping potion, which Harry drank down without fuss. He dearly craved some peace and quiet. Unfortunately, within moments of falling asleep, Harry found himself out of his body and hearing a rumbling of distant screams.

Well, that worked well.

Harry hung about only long enough to enjoy Donna getting a thorough dressing down from Healer Dee for telling her patient he'd died. He floated down the dark corridors, peeking into wards, listening hard for thoughts of Alice singing, and dodging other dreams and nightmares along the way. Dim amber globes hovered at intervals down the wards, casting an eerie orange glow over deceptively calm, slumbering faces, over witches and wizards who had lost their minds, whose thoughts and emotions, Harry now knew, no longer confined themselves to their physical bodies. The Healers did nothing to help them, nothing that Harry could see, nothing but make them tea and hold their hands. Harry knew they wanted more and he travelled warily. By now he knew if he paused to listen, even fleetingly, he would get sucked into the wrong mind.

"Hello! Yes, you there! You'll do. I'm ready for my close-up!"

Snagged, Harry struggled to disentangle himself from Gilderoy Lockhart's dream.

"I'm sorry," said Harry irritably, "but look, I really can't stay."

"I think the lilac, don't you?" Lockhart said airily, swishing his cape back and forth in front of a long mirror.

"Excellent choice, sir," beamed a smarmy photographer. "Now if you'd just hold still for me — that's the way." *FLASH!* "And again ..." *FLASH!*

Harry struggled to break free. "I'm sorry, look, let go of me! I said LET GO OF ME!"

But Lockhart wouldn't let go — until Harry conjured a few choice memories of his own — including Basilisks and cave-ins. Finally wrenching himself free, he made it back to his room and bobbed, dazed and confused, over his own hospital bed. It was empty. *Where'd I go?* Lime-green Healers were crouched over something on the floor. *Oh ... me.* Harry lingered only long enough to see them levitate him back into his bed and tuck him in very tightly. Heading back to the Closed Ward, and not wanting to get caught up with Lockhart again, Harry zoomed straight past him, but then stopped and wheeled around — Lockhart was gone!

Harry scanned the floor. Nothing. Then he looked up. *Oh.*

An over-inflated Gilderoy Lockhart bobbed elusively around the ceiling, his arms and legs flailing, screaming in terror as Donna, rushing down the aisle, fired arrow after arrow at him. Finally, one managed to penetrate his thick backside and sent a deflating Lockhart whizzing around the ward like a punctured balloon. Harry was just enjoying the moment when he heard a woman scream Neville's name. Harry lunged for the thought and saw Neville disappearing down a corridor. Hands grabbed at Neville, yanking him away even as Alice ran as hard as she could towards him, never getting any closer. All at once, Harry realised he wasn't where he thought he was.

"Neville's okay, Mrs Longbottom," he ventured, then sensed a new rush of terror. The dream vanished; Alice's heart was pounding madly. "Sorry, sorry!" Harry blurted. "Please, don't be scared. I don't want to hurt you, honest!"

Alice was having none of it, and Harry found himself ejected from her mind. The frail woman rocked in her bed, knees to her chest, humming tonelessly, her arms covering her head, her hands clutching at her sparse white hair. Harry felt terrible; he couldn't just leave her like this.

"I go to school with Neville," he called out hopefully. She must have heard something, for Harry felt her let her guard down just a little. "I'm Harry," he told her, "the Potters' boy."

Alice almost let him back in, but then other minds rose up — other people's nightmares — pressing in on them both: mad voices, screaming for

their loved ones, screaming for mercy, begging for their lives — for their deaths. Closing in on herself again, Alice became a tiny hummingbird in the corner of her mind. Harry rounded angrily on the cacophony of voices, on glimpses of many Voldemort, Lestrange, Dolohovs casting curses and laughing at their victims.

"Get away from her!" he yelled at the cackling Death Eaters, furious at them, furious at their victims, and furious at himself, knowing how unjust, how misplaced his anger was. The lost souls eagerly turned on him, as if magnetically attracted to his strong, sane soul.

In an effort to lead them away from Alice, Harry raced through the wards, listening, pulling in as many nightmares as he could along in his wake until he managed to lose them all in a whirlpool of misery somewhere three floors down. Leaving the night terrors of Saint Mungo's insane inmates to feast on each other, Harry slipped away, aching to get back into his own head. He did manage to find his way back to his own room, but once there he hit something of a snag: there was nothing going on in his head: no thoughts to latch onto, none at all. Every other time he'd simply woken up in his own head. Right now, though, as Harry looked down at his dead-to-the-world body, the lights were off and nobody was home. Harry wasn't too worried — not yet. He knew the dreamless sleeping potion would wear off eventually; he just had to be patient, though the longer he waited, the harder it was to stay calm. The night terrors kept finding him, and he'd escape one tortured soul only to be set upon by another. Soon, he lost sight of where he was — who he was — helplessly trapped inside one after another of other patients' traumatic memories. Harry cast about frantically for refuge from the roiling storm of nightmares. *There!* A quiet mind innocently beckoned, like an island in the eye of a hurricane: a man, his mind so quiet his only thoughts were for the rhythmic beating of his heart, nothing else. He was chanting dreamily to the song of his heart.

"Dah-dum ... dah-dum ... dah-dum ..."

Harry slipped into the mind of the chanting man and froze. Something wasn't right. The chanting heartbeat faded and Harry found himself in a chilling void, in the centre of a blackness so dense, so complete, he feared he'd never find his way out again. Despair hungered for Harry's soul. Freezing cold was piercing the man's senses. A glistening grey claw reached for him. Harry reeled in the blackness.

"NO! GET AWAY!" he cried. The hand curled around the man's throat — Harry's throat. "Crouch? Barty Crouch?"

Harry's vision fogged. Through the haze of Crouch's eyes he saw a hooded creature — a *Dementor!* — it's yawning mouth sucking air, it's breath a death rattle — closer — closer still ...

Harry fought desperately to escape Crouch's mind. A talon tenderly scraped Crouch's cheek — Harry's cheek, a victor, toying with its prey.

"Think of something happy!" Harry ordered Crouch frantically.

But there was nothing in Crouch's mind, only bewildered terror. Inhaled by darkness, Harry's own terrible memories gushed, unchecked into Crouch's void: his mother screaming for mercy; himself screaming through the agony of Voldemort's possession; Sirius falling to his death ...

"NO!" Harry screamed desperately. "Sirius! SIRIUS!"

"Master was a nasty, ungrateful swine who broke his mother's heart," cackled a new, oddly familiar voice.

Harry lunged for the new thought, desperate to escape Crouch's hell. He found himself in another.

"Deserved what he got, he did. My poor mistress, all alone now with no Kreacher to comfort her ... her ancestral home infested with Mudblood filth, blood traitors, half-breeds, thieves!"

"KREACHER!"

Red-hot rage surged through Harry's soul.

"SHUT-UP! JUST SHUT-UP! HE'S DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU — YOU BASTARD!"

Kreacher's foul laughter rang loud and long in Harry's mind.

"Oh, someone speaks to Kreacher now? Locked up all alone. Just like my poor mistress. All alone ..."

Harry was incensed. "That foul —"

"... no Kreacher to comfort her."

"— loathsome witch! How could you do it? How could you betray Sirius? How could you tell me he'd gone to the Ministry! That he was never coming back!"

A wave of revulsion swelled in Kreacher, choking him — choking Harry.

"The Potter boy," Kreacher observed curiously, his voice a rasping cackle, "the brat dares speak to Kreacher — presumptuous son of filth. Kreacher knows all about *Harry Potter!*"

Harry couldn't think, couldn't get his mind around his own feelings of righteous fury and grief over Sirius's death coupled with Kreacher's jubilation over his master's demise and his abject misery in being separated from his beloved mistress.

"Kreacher said Master would not come back from the Department of Mysteries!" Kreacher cackled triumphantly. "Master was such a disappointment to his poor mother!"

Harry yearned to beat Kreacher to a bloody pulp, but he was impotent to do anything other than experience Kreacher's glee. It was unbearable! There had to be some way to punish the evil toerag!

"*You tricked Sirius and me into an ambush*," roared Harry, "*and now he's dead! You betrayed the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black! You had a pact with them! You were bound to serve and protect them!*"

Kreacher's cackling stopped abruptly. Harry took savage pleasure in the stabbing pains of remorse he felt Kreacher fighting desperately to resist.

"*The last Black!*" roared Harry. "*Sirius BLACK! You betrayed your family! You betrayed your beloved mistress!*"

"Kreacher's mistress *disowned* Sirius Black," Kreacher declared fiercely, but Harry could sense the elf's mounting anxiety. An image of the Black family tapestry flickered past — Mrs Black thrusting her wand toward Sirius's name and blasting a hole straight through it. Harry was having none of it.

"*Sirius might have been a disappointment to his mother, but she didn't want her son DEAD! HER LAST SON, DEAD! You did this! You can NEVER atone for what you did!*"

"NO!" Kreacher screeched. "Kreacher is his mistress's most devoted servant!"

"*You betrayed her,*" Harry shot savagely, "*and you betrayed Sirius's father, as well! HE never disowned Sirius, did he! DID HE?!*"

A new rush of fear and self-loathing swelled in Kreacher.

"*Sirius is DEAD because YOU betrayed the House of Black! You'll rot for eternity for what you did!*"

"No!" Kreacher begged tearfully. "No! Get out of Kreacher's head!"

"We think not," hissed a new voice, an otherworldly, guttural, female voice. A demon's face filled Harry's mind, a black face crowned with writhing, spitting serpents. "Justice commands our attention. Go now, little one. *Pacta sunt servanda!*"

Kreacher's screams were still ringing in Harry's mind when he found himself bobbing dizzily over his empty bed. He had no idea how he got there. Did he see — was that the demon from his nightmare? Megaera? *Pacta sunt servanda*? He realised it was Latin, but he didn't even know what it meant, so how could he have dreamt it up? Was it a spell he'd read somewhere? Maybe it didn't mean anything; he was finding it hard to tell what was real and what wasn't any more. The Healers picked up his unconscious body and tucked him in again. Harry imagined he'd be sporting some good bruises in the morning if he kept falling out of bed. Ah, maybe not; one of the Healers was conjuring some ropes.

The Healers continued prowling his room with their clipboards, checking in on him every half-hour or so. Harry just watched them. He couldn't help but watch them; he couldn't close his mind. He just hovered around, dodging other minds as best he could. He floated like that for hours, trying to hold off other tortured souls by filling his battered mind with nightmares of his own. He spent so long trying to shut out other thoughts that he almost missed it — his arm — it was only a twinge, but Harry leapt at the fleeting thought. At last, he was in his right mind again. At last, he could rest.

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you?"

Harry blinked against the charmed sunlight flooding his room. It was Donna, the Healer who'd told him he died.

"I'm Trainee Healer Lully," she said cheerily, "but you can call me Donna. How are we feeling this morning?"

Harry just stared at the girl, failing to come up with a response that wouldn't earn his mouth being Scourgified.

"Why don't we get you some breakfast sorted?" Donna patted his hand and went to leave.

"Donna?" Harry growled through gritted teeth.

The girl scurried back to him. "Yes, dear?"

"Do you reckon we could lose the ropes?"

Donna returned shortly with his breakfast and was just pouring him some juice when Harry's scar exploded. He screamed in agony, but his heart soared; he was so happy — surprised — elated!

A man was shouting his name. "Harry? Harry! Look at me! Don't just stand there, girl, get the Healer!"

Maniacal laughter filled the spinning room. It stopped abruptly when Harry realised it was him. He was shaking so badly he could barely tell if he was standing, sitting, or what. A stranger was pinning him down. Harry tried desperately to fight him off.

"Harry, stop, please! Let me help you!"

Footsteps raced into the room.

"Who are you!" panted Harry, flailing against the grabbing hands. "Where am I?"

"Harry, look at me! It's Healer Dee. You remember, don't you? You're in Saint Mungo's Hospital. We need to get him back into bed."

Harry discovered he was flat on his back on the cold hard floor, his body tangled in his sheets. Blue and green shapes swam in and out of focus above him. Still shaking, he let himself be lifted back into bed, and he lay there, pressing his palm against his white-hot scar. With a violent lunge, he vomited a stream of fluid onto the floor.

"I have to — I need to —" he panted. He broke off and heaved again but there was nothing left. "Remus! I need Remus!"

"I'll get Lupin," offered a man in blue robes.

Harry closed his eyes tightly and tried to breathe. Within moments, Remus was striding into the room and gripping him by the shoulders.

"Harry? What is it? What's wrong?"

"*Voldemort!*" Harry rasped feverishly.

Sharp gasps sounded. Eyes shot to every corner of the room, but there didn't appear to be any Dark Lords lurking about.

"Could Harry and I have a moment, please?" said Remus.

The blue-robed man nodded and left immediately. Healer Dee started to object, but Remus insisted. Harry squeezed shut his eyes; he felt dizzy and sick. A cool hand pressed against his hot forehead.

"You're burning up," murmured Remus.

"*Voldemort!*" Harry blurted fiercely. "*He knows I'm here! How does he know I'm here?* Is there *another* traitor in the Order? *Another Pettigrew? Did they send me through the boiler? What's going on?*"

"Harry, calm down," ordered Remus. He made him drink some water. "Start from the beginning."

"He thinks I'm half-dead," Harry hissed feverishly. "He's still laughing — right bloody chuffed! Talking about rewarding his servant! Of honouring him!"

"He spoke of a traitor?" Remus bit sharply. "Who is it?"

Harry shook his head fitfully; the connection was gone.

"I don't know," he conceded bitterly.

"Could you tell if he was talking about a male or female servant?" asked Remus.

Harry tried to think — tried to breathe; his scar was a burning knife, splitting his head open.

"I — I think he just — he just said 'my servant'. I'm not sure. It has to be Snape!" he declared, gathering steam again. "*He's the reason I'm here, isn't he?!* *He did this to me, didn't he?!* He's working for *him* again, isn't he?!" *Isn't he?!*"

Remus and Harry stared grimly at each other, Harry's breathing even louder in the otherwise quiet room. He could sense Remus worrying about him, but he felt his resolve, too, his strength. Harry's ragged breathing slowly eased, though he still had a massive headache.

"Harry, we think we've worked out what happened at the house," Remus began. "Snape *was* involved in setting up the security charm, but so, too, were Mad-Eye Moody and Mundungus Fletcher. Between the three of them, they set up a series of charms to summon you safely through the house to a secure and protected location: the Panic Room, they called it."

"And Snape sabotaged it," Harry stated coldly.

Remus stared evenly at Harry for a long moment.

"We don't know that, Harry. Not yet. From what we learned last night, it does seem that the failure *was* accidental, though in light of the vision you just had ..." Remus blew out his cheeks and ran a hand through his hair. "Did you see or hear anything else?"

"Just that he was *ecstatic*," Harry growled, trying to hold still his pounding head. "Surprised — but really, *really* happy."

Remus rubbed thoughtfully at his morning stubble.

"Harry, before we go accusing anyone of anything, I need a bit of time to talk this through with Professor Dumbledore. Okay? Harry?"

"Only Dumbledore," Harry conceded bitterly. "No offence or anything, but if somebody in the Order's —"

"Only the Headmaster," Remus agreed.

Harry screwed up his face and rubbed at his throbbing scar.

"What about this dodgy security charm?" he spat angrily. "Why'd it suck me through the boiler? And why didn't anyone *tell* me about it anyway?"

Or you either? What's going on?"

"Harry, I'll try to answer everything I can, but first, I want the Healers to check you over; you're pale as a ghost. And maybe they can give you something for the pain from your scar."

Harry glared up at Remus. Remus returned his gaze unwaveringly. He took Harry's impatient shrug as a yes and let the Healers back in.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Harry," he murmured, giving the boy's arm a squeeze. "I'll just go pass on your message to our friend."

The Healers gave Harry several painkilling potions, and blessed relief rolled through his aching bones, leaving his mind free to fester over whom in the Order had betrayed him. It had to be Snape!

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 18 – The Wheel of Anxiety

True to his word, Remus returned from Professor Dumbledore within ten minutes and gave Harry a slight, knowing nod. By this stage, Healer Dee had been joined by three new Healers. Armed with magnifying glasses, they were all over his scar and full of questions about his fit. Harry had well-reached the limit of his patience and flatly refused to say anything other than admitting it wasn't the first time it had happened. The Healers kept pressing him for information anyway.

"I'm sorry," Remus said firmly, stepping forward, "but I don't think Harry's really up to answering a lot of questions right now."

Harry shot his guardian a grateful look. The three new Healers didn't look nearly so pleased; he got the sense they'd been denied a great treat.

Alone again, Remus sat on a stool by Harry's bed and talked him through the failure of the security charm: how Moody charmed all the walls and floors to safely 'swallow' Harry as he passed; how Dung compiled the list of 'friendlies'; how Snape charmed Harry's moodstone and set up the target room to receive it and him.

"But they didn't think to mention the stupid thing to *me*," grumbled Harry, "or *you*."

"No," agreed Remus stiffly. "It seems Dung didn't know that and asked Snape late on Monday night if he'd — what were his exact words — 'got off his fat arse and finished his bit yet?'. Snape declared that his part was already done and apparently left in something of a huff. Dung had his list from Dumbledore by that stage, and so, unbeknownst to either Moody or Snape, he went ahead and activated the charms."

"So, I was right!" Harry snapped, his silver eyes glittering. "Snape did this to me. Either he's a complete incompetent with Summoning Charms, or he's the traitor."

Remus nodded half-heartedly. "Let's hold off on accusations for a moment. We *think* we may understand what went wrong. You know about the importance of the natural medium of a summoned object ...?"

Harry nodded impatiently. "You need a clear path. Even if it has to go around a few corners, as long as you have a free flight path, it won't try to crash through a brick wall or anything."

"Well, yes, there's that," Remus agreed, "but there's also the concept of objects passing through whichever element is appropriate for their natural state: air, earth, fire, or water. The thing being summoned was your moodstone wristband," he held up the offending item as if Exhibit A, "which is just leather and stone, so the Summoning Charm was enhanced to ensure it would adopt the natural medium of any associated animating body connected to the wristband — which obviously in your case would be air ..."

"Yeah ..." said Harry cautiously.

"Well, you were in the bath, you see," said Remus, setting the moodstone aside. "At first we thought Snape didn't account for situations when you might be sitting in or submerged in water. Of course, that was the first thing they checked, but it didn't make any difference at all. It wasn't until the early hours of this morning that Hestia came up with a possible scenario. Before you were pulled into the pipes, did you happen to be underwater?"

Harry blinked. "But you just said —"

"Just humour me, Harry, please. Were you underwater?"

"Well, yeah, I think so."

"And, er, I don't suppose you were holding a fish at the time?"

Harry's face grew hot.

"Maybe," he said slowly. Then the horrible truth dawned and, appalled, he railed, "I got dragged through a boiler because of a *bath toy*!?"

"Natural medium," Remus said, wincing apologetically. "The combination of you holding on to an animated mosaic fish as well as being underwater at the same time was enough to confuse the charms into thinking the wristband needed to travel by *water* to the Panic Room. To a Summoning Charm, humans aren't any more important than any other animated entity."

Harry was still busy being appalled. His mouth opened and closed a few times but, as hard as he tried, he could think of no rebuttal to Remus's logic. Traitor or not, even he had to concede that Snape couldn't possibly have been relying on him being underwater and hanging onto a toy fish at the same time in order to spring a trap.

"Still sounds like a pretty ordinary spell," he said bitterly. "I bet Professor *Flitwick* could've made it foolproof."

"I imagine that's true," Remus agreed fairly. Immensely frustrated, Harry still needed a target.

"So, who tripped the stupid charm, anyway?" he said testily. "Dung miss someone on his list? No, wait; let me guess: off pilfering pickled toads?"

Remus went very still. He seemed to be bracing himself for something.

"What?" Harry said, his frustration fading, replaced by Remus's anxiety.

"Elizabeth," said Remus quietly — almost pleadingly. "She arrived on Sunday night, but she couldn't reach anyone; we were all at the feast ..." Remus's voice trailed off and he shrugged apologetically. "She was our 'Death Eater' at Privet Drive, too. She ended up coming through a pre-existing portal from another hidden Black property. She had no idea — Harry, it was Elizabeth's arrival that tripped the charm."

"Oh," Harry said, for want of anything more substantial to say. He could feel Remus's emotions tearing him up inside him about Elizabeth — anguish, joy, fear — so many things, all mixed up together. "Did she really come just to see me — all the way from Canada?" he asked wonderingly, to which Remus nodded. "Erm, have you told her — does she know about Sirius?"

Remus's careful mask slipped a little. "She found out last night ... they were very close."

"Was she ..." started Harry, "I mean, is she okay?"

Harry felt a rush of gratitude from his guardian.

"She will be. She stayed over at the house last night. How do you feel about her being there?"

Harry was unaccustomed to having his opinion asked about such things.

"Fine with me," he said, shrugging. "But why didn't you tell me? About you and her being married, I mean."

Remus looked back at him blankly. "Me and ...? But you knew about that, didn't you?"

"I didn't even know Elizabeth existed until last week."

"But your aunt, she told you about Lizzie." When Harry shook his head, Remus frowned deeply. "But you've been writing to her ..." he reminded him.

"I only wrote to the Werewolf Registry to learn about your potion — I had no idea she was mine."

Harry paused at his own odd but accurate choice of words, and a pleasantly warm feeling spread through his chest that had nothing to do with pain-killing potions. His godmother had come to see him — *him*.

"Harry, I'm sorry, truly," said Remus sincerely. "I never realised. I thought — well, this seems a bit daft now — I thought you avoided mentioning her to spare my feelings."

The smile budding on Harry's face faded away.

"Oh," he said, "right. So ... erm, are you divorced or ..."

Remus shook his head slightly. "Still married, actually. Fourteen years next Christmas."

"But she lives in Canada?" prompted Harry. Remus didn't answer straight away; Harry could feel the turmoil within him. "Sorry, forget it; it's none of my business."

"Hey," chided Remus, "of course you have a right to know what's going on. It's just ... well, Elizabeth did move to Canada after we broke up, but, to be honest, I'd rather not get into all the gory details right here and now."

Harry looked around his messed up room and nodded glumly.

"She'll be along later, Hermione, too. The Healers said no visitors before lunch." Remus followed Harry's gaze around the room. "I guess Lord Voldemort didn't get the memo."

Harry shook his head to try to clear it, to try to get back on topic. He didn't know what to feel; his emotions kept bouncing all over the place.

"What about Voldemort?" he insisted, clutching now at straws. "What about him rewarding his servant?"

Remus grimaced and held up a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Even without his glasses, Harry could make out the headline:

DEATH VIGIL FOR HARRY POTTER!

"You said Voldemort was surprised," Remus reminded him. "I daresay he believes Snape made an attempt on your life to please him."

"Is that what Snape's telling him?" Harry spat indignantly; he could just imagine Snape's revolting, gloating face.

"No. Professor Dumbledore is keeping Snape very close. The paper merely refers to 'a terrible accident'. Voldemort won't want to risk Snape's cover by contacting him for details."

Details? A sudden, horrible thought struck Harry: the bass player! Whoever hired the music box next would have a right laugh if Donaghan Tremlett blabbed, if they ever found out Harry Potter took a bath and ended up naked in a house-elf's closet because he'd been sprung singing to a fish! All thoughts of Lord Voldemort fled Harry's mind in the face of such peril — Draco Malfoy would be crowing all year! And Snape! Traitor or not, Harry had *no* desire to give him any more ammunition with which to humiliate him.

"Did you find the bass player?" he blurted. "Have you taken the music box back?"

Baffled by the change of subject, Remus said, "Harry, really, that's the last thing you need to be worrying about. It'll be fine; I'll take it back tomorrow."

"Can I buy it?" Harry asked desperately. "My own money, of course."

"Buy it? Do you have any idea how much those things cost?"

Harry girded himself for combat. If there was ever a time to play up for sympathy, this was it. He threw in puppy-dog eyes, tugged at Remus's sleeve, called him Moony — the works. He stopped short of calling him 'Dad', though; he had a feeling that would be playing dirty after what he'd felt from his guardian the night before. He tried every argument he could think of, but his voice trailed off to nothing when he realised that Remus just wasn't buying it.

"You want to tell me what this is *really* about?" Remus said.

Should've thrown in a 'Dad', Harry thought irritably. He reluctantly came clean with the real reason he wanted to keep the box. Remus did an impressive job of keeping a straight face, but Harry could easily sense his relief and amusement.

"It's not funny."

"Not at all," Remus agreed gravely.

Donna returned with a fresh breakfast tray, which Harry poked at with numb fingers. Remus kept nudging him to eat, reminding him that the sooner he regained his strength, the sooner he'd be able to leave. Harry tried some of the toast.

"It's cold," he grumbled.

Remus re-heated the toast with a tap of his wand.

"You know," he offered conversationally, "I think it might be a good idea if we reset all the musicians' memories before they go back to the hire shop." Harry's eyes shot up. "For security reasons, of course," Remus added lightly, but his eyes twinkled as he poured Harry's tea. "In fact, I must remember to chastise Mad-Eye for not thinking of it."

Still in his bathrobe and slippers, Remus was just about to go home to change when Healer Dee returned. Remus lingered, keeping one eye on the Healer and another on Harry, who had mouthed 'stay!' to him. Wand in hand, Healer Dee circled the room, muttering incantations at the wall charts. Sure enough, when she returned to her patient, she was full of questions he didn't want to answer.

"Harry, after your fit, you cried out You-Know-Who's name ... was it — were you having some kind of flashback about him — a waking nightmare?"

Remus found something under his fingernails requiring his attention.

"Your body had such a visceral reaction," Healer Dee murmured, reaching out a hand to caress Harry's forehead. "And your scar ... you were burning up. Whatever you experienced, it must have been very vivid ..."

"He's hard to forget," said Harry.

"Of course he is," she said sympathetically. "If you like, I could arrange for a consultation with a Psycho-Healer," she offered helpfully.

Remus's ears picked up with interest at that.

"No," Harry said coldly, and he would brook no more discussion on the topic. Perhaps sensing the end of Harry's tether fast approaching, Remus quizzed the Healer about how long he would have to remain in hospital.

"It's hard to say, Mr Lupin," she said. "This morning's seizure certainly didn't help. But even without that, Harry's soul is slowing down his recovery, continuing to draw energy away from his body."

Harry's face grew warm. "I can't help it," he muttered under his breath.

"Of course not," Healer Dee said soothingly, "but it's something we will need to monitor very carefully."

"How?" Harry asked dubiously. As far as he could tell, the Healers had *no idea* what he'd been up to.

"We monitor your life energies on your Wheel of Anxiety," Healer Dee was explaining. "Salts for the body, mercury for the intellect, sulphur for the soul."

"Anxiety?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Oh, it's only called that because there is a lot of tension, a constant battle, really, over what consumes your life force," she said reassuringly. Harry didn't feel particularly reassured. "We just need you to take it easy for a while," she urged him. "Give your soul a chance to settle down and

your salts to build back up."

Harry was quick to point out he could rest best at home.

"I don't think you realise how tenuous your recovery remains," Healer Dee said with a chastising smile. "Your soul's energy is right off the chart."

She summoned his Wheel of Anxiety chart from the wall to his lap to show him. As blurry as it was to him without his glasses, Harry could see she wasn't speaking figuratively; hundreds of little golden sulphur symbols had completely filled the soul slice of the wheel and were floating in a glittering stream towards the ceiling. Conversely, the copper-coloured salt symbols under his body were pitifully low.

"What ... so I can *feel* a lot?" Harry joked nervously.

She opened her mouth as if to launch into a lengthy explanation then stopped herself.

"Yes, actually," she said simply. "Of course," she added, looking at the chart thoughtfully, "Leos do tend to be rather emotional."

On behalf of all Leos, Harry rather took offence at that. After casting a dirty look at Remus, who was trying not to smile, he squinted disapprovingly at the decent, but comparatively smaller stack of intellectual mercury symbols.

"We're not idiots, you know," he grumbled under his breath.

Healer Dee looked surprised. "Oh, no, no, of course not. It doesn't relate to your abilities but rather where your energy is focussed. And right now —"

Healer Dee broke off at the sound of a dove cooing from Harry's lap.

"That wasn't me," he said at once.

"No," she agreed, smiling with relief. "I just turned that on; it lets us know when your salts have improved. Can you see? Two sulphur symbols have transfigured over to salt."

Both Remus and Harry squinted to where the Healer was pointing, but it was just a bunch of glitter to Harry; he'd take her word for it.

"What noise does it make if it falls?" asked Remus.

The Healer's smile stiffened. "The raven's caw will alert us if Harry's salts start falling again."

Harry suppressed a shudder, remembering the ravens pecking him to death in Cho's nightmare. Why couldn't he just have a machine that went ping like everyone else?

"Right," he said grimly, rubbing at his prickling scar, "so, apart from losing my mind, are there any other side effects I should know about?"

"Some," Healer Dee admitted, sending his wheel back to the wall. "With such abnormally high sulphur levels, you're likely to suffer rapid mood swings, even hallucinations. If you find things are getting too much for you then you should let me know, or your guardians," she added with a nod to Remus, "and we can help smooth things over."

"He could probably use something now," Remus suggested.

Nodding wisely, Healer Dee said, "I'll be right back."

Now convinced he was going quietly nuts, Harry struggled to cobble together what he'd been through since his heart stopped. It was all becoming something of a blur. He knew the Longbottoms were real, and Kreacher, and Lockhart, too, but Megaera wasn't.

"Remus, do you know what 'pacta sunt servanda' means? Is it a spell?"

"A spell?" Remus repeated blankly. "No, it just means agreements must be honoured."

Harry nodded distractedly. He must have heard it in class sometime ... maybe in Charms; Flitwick was always getting them to practice Latin phrases for new spells.

"You know that demon ..." he started.

"Megaera?" prompted Remus. "Have you been having that nightmare again?"

"Kind of," Harry said uneasily. "What do you think it means?"

"She saved you from falling off your broom last time," Remus noted thoughtfully. "What did she do to you this time?"

"Nothing, really, she was just there, talking about justice."

"Justice ..." Remus mused, then repeated the word, mulling it over. "You said she was wearing referee robes last time, didn't you? Maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something: That justice may not have a pretty face? That achieving peace requires hard decisions — even violence, if all else fails?"

Harry said nothing; it felt like his guardian could see straight through him sometimes.

"Given everything you've been through, son," Remus noted soberly, "it's hardly surprising you'd be preoccupied with finding justice. As are we all," he added bitterly beneath his breath.

Harry's head fell back dejectedly. He didn't even know what justice meant any more; he was never going to stop being an orphan, after all. He was certain of one thing, though: he could just bet that if Megaera were real, then she and Voldemort would get on like a house on fire.

With neither Remus nor Healer Dee showing any sign of letting him enjoy a good wallow, he accepted a thimbleful of magenta Euphoria Elixir. By the time Healer Dee left again, all thoughts of Kreacher and Megaera and Voldemort left with her, disappearing like popped bubbles, and a wonderfully warm and carefree sensation spread through Harry's body, leaving him with an irresistible urge to hug someone. Remus wisely stepped back, revealing —

"Cho," Harry breathed blissfully.

Standing at the door in her volunteer robes and lime-green dragon-hide apron, Cho rushed forward to hug him. Remus looked on indulgently, then down at his ratty old bathrobe, and elected to Disapparate home to dress and get breakfast for 'the girls'.

"Healer Dee said I could visit for a little while," Cho said, stroking Harry's hair. "How are you feeling?"

Harry stretched deliciously between the sheets.

"Amazing," he said blissfully. "She gave me this lovely little potion, just this big." Helpfully, he held up all of his thumbs and fingers to show her.

Chuckling softly, Cho reached for his fingers and kissed them.

"Is there anything you need," she asked, looking around searchingly, "books, magazines, anything?"

"Just you," he said dreamily.

This was, apparently, exactly what Cho wanted to hear. Moving closer again, they kissed. Harry relished the connection, drawing it out as long as he could. Birds twittered all around them; they could have been back in the Owlery at Hogwarts. Cho felt all soft and wonderful, and she smelled so good. Tipsy with euphoria, he shifted a little and patted his bed invitingly.

Cho cast a tentative look at the door. "I don't know — the Healers ..."

"Are off doing rounds," Harry said, tugging her close again. "C'mere."

Smiling softly, Cho carefully removed her crisp linen headdress. Climbing primly onto the bed in her long white robes, she cuddled into his chest. Harry marvelled at how easily she fit into the crook of his shoulder. Somewhere in the room, a dove cooed, transfiguring energy from Harry's soul to his body. Not that his body was up to doing anything too interesting with that energy just at the moment. More birds twittered contentedly as Harry closed his eyes and kissed Cho's forehead, all the petty quibbles and jealousies of the last weekend forgotten after the way she saved his skin. He could already feel the buzz of the short-lived Euphoria Elixir wearing off, leaving his head clearer but gloriously relaxed. Snuggling closer to his girl, he was dearly hoping they'd both fall asleep and that Cho would start dreaming about kissing him again. He'd really enjoyed that one (though he was careful to maintain a firm grip around her arms; he didn't fancy getting another black eye).

It wasn't long before he got half his wish; Cho was asleep. Then he fell asleep, too, and found himself hovering over his bed, impatient for her to start dreaming. While he was waiting, Healer Abercrombie came by to check on him. The male Healer didn't seem the least bit bothered to see one of his volunteers cuddled next to a patient. He went straight to Harry's Wheel of Anxiety, which was peacefully cooing, made some notes on his clipboard, checked Harry's fingers and toes, made some more notes, and left again. Harry received a second visitor, but after staring at him and Cho for several long moments, Ginny turned on her heels and rushed from the room. Harry's invisible soul drifted closer to Cho, so close he could count the freckles on her nose. He would have kissed her if he had any lips.

"Come on," he begged her, "start dreaming. Please?"

Concentrating hard on any stray thoughts she might have, he at last felt her mind stir. Vague colours faded in and out then a few random words. But it was all a lot of medical gobbledegook: names of potions and such.

"Come on, dream about Harry — Harry!"

At last, he heard his name. Following the thought into her mind, he saw himself walking in his pyjamas up the steps to the Owlery late at night. Cho stood below, half-hidden behind a limestone column, looking indecisive — and also wearing pyjamas. The dream-Harry disappeared into the twittering Owlery, but still Cho hesitated. Harry felt obliged to offer some encouragement.

"Come on, go get me! Up you go. Go on, it'll be great. Seriously!"

Cho gave no sign of noticing his presence in her mind, but she did at last come out from behind her column. Unfortunately, she stepped straight into a dungeon laboratory where Severus Snape was droning on about Belladonna seeds. The purple seeds started swelling, bigger and bigger, until they squeezed all the students hard up against the walls, so hard they turned into little black paper dolls that slipped right under the dungeon door and floated outside and into the sunshine where they danced on the breeze.

"Cho, stop messing about!" Harry commanded with not a little exasperation. "You've got to find Harry, Harry Potter!"

But paper-doll Cho was busy playing in the clouds.

"Harry's waiting for you in the Owlery," he reminded her, growing impatient. "Come on, come on! You need Harry!"

Although she didn't seem to hear his words, she must have somehow felt his will, for a paper-doll Harry appeared, dancing in the clouds with her.

"Go to the Owlery — the Owlery!" Harry ordered Cho. He conjured a very clear image of the Owlery tower and helpfully added a flashing, pink-neon sign:

HARRY IS HERE!

The paper dolls formed a little chain and fluttered down towards the castle. The sky was darkening again; stars twinkled. Excellent, thought Harry with great satisfaction, though paper doll romance was not exactly what he had in mind. He really needed to get them back into their bodies — and surely the Room of Requirement would be more comfortable than the Owlery.

"Go to the Room of Requirement," Harry ordered Cho, and he started filling her mind with images of his plush four-poster.

The paper-dolls obediently flitted through the maze of castle corridors, hand in paper hand, then slipped under a door. In a blink, the dolls were gone and Cho and the dream-Harry were standing together in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Cho stretched her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly. Harry felt everything Cho was feeling — which was just excellent — but they weren't getting any closer to the bed.

"It's *incredibly* comfortable," he assured her and added some extremely affectionate cushions, but dream-Harry was reciting some stupid sonnet and Cho would not be distracted.

Harry took a shot at trying to convince her she really didn't need pyjamas to listen to poetry, but she wasn't paying him the slightest bit of attention. Immensely frustrated, he conjured the sound of his DA whistle blowing. Cho winced at the whistle — which was encouraging — but her attention remained fixed on her poetry-spewing dream-Harry. Harry decided that possession was a lot easier with brain-damaged people! Then he had a sudden, brilliant thought; she wouldn't need clothes for a bath! He immediately conjured a memory of his own luxurious bathtub and filled it with bubbles, but that only seemed to upset her, so he stopped. Then she was kissing her dream-Harry again, urgently, almost desperately.

This is more like it, thought Harry, well-pleased. But what he really needed was to be inside dream-Harry's head, taking charge of the situation and feeling Cho from the proper perspective — his. But to Harry's mounting frustration, every time he tried to bend Cho's will, she managed to resist him somehow, and he found himself ejected from her mind and bobbing around the ceiling of his hospital room. Thoroughly miffed, he was just heading back for his third attempt when the door opened and Donna came bustling into the room to collect his breakfast tray. She paused to smile fondly at the couple cuddled on the bed.

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Harry roared, unheard, into the ether, but Donna went right ahead and reached over and delicately tapped Cho's shoulder.

Cho's fist whipped out and the breakfast tray went flying, landing with a great clatter. Harry was suddenly back in his own head, waking up and swearing furiously.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry!" Cho cried, tumbling off the bed and landing hard on the floor.

"Healer Aber-combie's on da foor," Donna said resentfully, pinching her nose.

Harry was incensed, but he could hardly explain why. He could, however, take some small comfort from Donna's bloody nose: justice served! Apologising profusely to everyone, Cho scrambled around the floor wiping up runny eggs whilst Donna went cross-eyed fixing her own nose.

"Ah, that's better," she said, inhaling deeply, her indefatigable cheeriness returning. "I'll get a fresh tray." She took Harry's tray from Cho, winked at them both, and said as she left, "Behave yourselves, okay?"

Looking flushed, Cho muttered, "I better get back to work."

"No, no, no!" Harry blurted, struggling to sit up. "I need to sleep with you!"

Cho blushed scarlet. "Sorry?"

Belatedly realising what he said, Harry decided a violent coughing fit was in order. Keeping one eye on the door, Cho poured him some water and clapped him on the back. Harry kept coughing until he'd come up with something to explain away his idiotic faux pas. He was coughing for quite some time.

"Sorry," he rasped, collapsing into his pillows and trying to laugh it off, "I don't know why I said that — I can't even move my toes." Both his coughing fit and his frustration at being woken up had produced real tears in his eyes, and he let his voice catch in his throat as he added thickly, "I need you, Cho. The last two days have been a complete nightmare."

Cho melted. She wrapped him in a tight hug, pressing her hot cheek against his. Harry smiled smugly over her shoulder. He was just thinking he'd gotten away with it, just thinking she'd come back to bed, when she drew back, looking anxious.

"Harry, the Healers say patients sometimes hear things — last night you said, 'no more ravens'. I — I had a dream with ravens. How did you know that? Were you reading my mind?" A note of panic crept into her voice. "Are you doing it now?"

Harry knew he wasn't thinking quickly enough to put together a good solid lie, so he resorted to a few half-truths.

“It was the bath — it did something to me. I’m really sorry, but I just wanted to help you; you know, stopping the ravens, turning them into swans ...”

Cho gasped in shock. “You did that? Inside my mind? You — you possessed me?”

Harry winced at the word but did not deny it.

“What else did you do to me?” Cho whispered tremulously.

“Nothing!” he said at once, reddening. “I just saw some dreams. On the roof at my place ... you know, er, kissing and stuff.”

Shaken, Cho folded her arms across her chest, as if trying to protect herself. A horribly hot feeling was spreading across Harry’s skin. He knew exactly what it was like to have unwelcome intruders in your mind, intruders who forced you to do things against your will. Facing the girl for real, in flesh and blood, what seemed like a game not ten minutes earlier now seemed anything but. Panic tightened his chest. If she ever found out ... If she ever told anyone! A raven’s caw pierced the air, making both Harry and Cho start.

“That wasn’t me,” Harry said at once, “it’s my anxiety — I mean my wheel — chart — thingy. Healer Dee did it!”

“Healer Dee ...” Fresh mortification swept over Cho and she paled. “Have you — did you tell anyone what you saw last night?”

“Of course not!” Harry said at once, horrified at the very thought.

“It’s just — it’s just that it’s personal, you know?” she said, blinking. “They — they don’t take candidates who can’t deal with — death.”

“Trust me,” Harry rasped, now finding his head spinning and his breath hard to come by, “I’m not telling anyone anything! It’s *no one’s* business but ours!”

A second raven’s caw sounded. Healer Dee was already rushing into the room. After clucking disapprovingly over Harry’s Wheel of Anxiety, she served him a tall dose of Strengthening Solution and left Cho in no doubt that visiting time was over.

“Five minutes, Miss Chang,” she said sternly on her way out.

Harry begged Cho to come closer. She obliged but reluctantly.

“Cho, I’m so sorry I possessed you, believe me,” he said, actually meaning it this time. “Honestly, I didn’t even know what was happening — not at first; I thought it was my own dream.” Cho looked confused. “I had dreams about us on the roof, too,” he admitted. “Can’t say I know much poetry, though.” Briefly relieved, Cho was now looking mortified again. “Anyway,” he said, pushing on, “that’s when I realised it was your dream, not mine, so I backed off.”

Cho nodded tensely. “But then how did you see my nightmare with you and Cedric? That was later.”

It was Harry’s turn to blush.

“Oh, right, well ... the bath wasn’t much fun,” he admitted, rubbing his neck, “and your dreams were better than mine so I kind of, er ... went back.”

“Back?” Cho shook her head in disbelief; she didn’t seem to know whether to feel flattered or humiliated.

“Cho, look, I know you can’t help what’s in your dreams, and I know I shouldn’t have been in your head at all ... but — well, something good came out of it, didn’t it? Your nightmare stopped, didn’t it?” he said hopefully.

Whilst Cho regarded him silently for a long few moments, Harry assembled his most dolefully innocent face.

“Is that why you did it?” she said in an odd voice. “To save me from my own dreams?”

Harry felt deeply stupid, now, reminded as he was of Hermione’s comment about him having a ‘saving people’ thing.

“Well, yeah. Phoenix Song has helped me in the past — I thought it might help you.”

“It did,” she agreed softly. “It helped a lot.” She chewed at her lip, thinking. “And it was just last night ...”

The barest moment of hesitation from Harry betrayed the truth; Cho wasn’t a Ravenclaw for nothing.

“You did it again!” she declared indignantly.

Instantly red-faced, Harry knew full well he was in the wrong. The only viable option, of course, was to lash out, his mood changing tack quicker than a Snitch.

“I couldn’t help it! That rotten bath water’s still in me! And you were hardly helping!” he said, matching her indignation and raising it a notch. “You could’ve dreamt about sitting your NEWTs or something, but, no, you had to go and start snogging my socks off! And you’re lying right there in my arms — what am I supposed to — whoa! Hold on!” he cried in alarm, for Cho had whipped out her wand.

“You couldn’t help it,” she repeated cynically. Raising her wand, she made the tip wriggle, writing something upon the air. Neon-pink letters materialised, spelling:

HARRY IS HERE!

Sprung, Harry held his breath. The CCU fell silent; even the wall charts stopped twittering.

“Okay, that was me,” he conceded.

Her arms folded once more, her face inscrutable, Cho took her time deciding what to do with him. At last, she leaned across the bed, her wand tip pressing into his chest.

“If you ever pull a stunt like that again, Potter,” she said with soft menace, “I’m going to start dreaming about Roger Davies.”

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 19 – Elizabeth

Harry spent his morning sleeping and doing his best to stop his mind from wandering off. He wasn't having too much success. Bored with watching himself snoring, he risked a quiet drift down the corridors, dodging unpleasant thoughts, and trying not to possess anyone. Fortunately, the daytime hospital was full of busy minds going about their business: patients wailing, Healers healing, sleigh bells ringing. After narrowly avoided a sobbing girl being tugged along by her runners, he sneaked down to the Closed Ward, fancying a chat with someone who wasn't scared of him.

The Longbottoms occupied the last two beds in their ward. With the curtains drawn all the way across, it was almost a private room for them, boasting a few ratty pot plants, faded children's drawings on the wall — and bars on the windows. Harry double-checked the name above the bed. Frank was recognisable — but only just. His wasted face and greying hair revealed nothing of the gleeful husband and father that Harry had come to know through his memories. Right now, at ten in the morning, Frank was sitting up in bed, his face screwed up in concentration, carefully tearing his newspaper into a stack of long thin strips. What he planned to do with them was anyone's guess.

Hovering overhead, Harry wasn't sure what to do. Frank wasn't sending out any idle thoughts or dreams that he could latch onto: no daydreams of Alice singing, no giggling baby-Neville. Harry supposed he'd need to come back when Frank was asleep. Nearby, Alice stood by a sunny window in her nightdress, her forehead pressed into the bars as if she might slip through them if only she could waste away enough. His thoughts elsewhere, it took Harry a moment to notice they had company.

"Morning, Mrs Longbottom," Cho called in a determinedly bright tone. "That's the way."

Very gently, she tugged a compliant Alice towards a hand basin then set about helping her brush her teeth. She was so patient with her. When Cho shook out a fresh nightie for Alice, Harry belatedly realised he had no business being there. Retreating to his own room, he contented himself with hanging out with Ron and Hermione, who were sitting at his bedside with a stack of party photos, waiting for him to wake up and teasing each other in good-humoured whispers. It was beyond Harry why they couldn't act like this when he was awake.

Woken for lunch, he squinted with quicksilver eyes at the contents of his tray, bemused to discover that the hospital house-elves had cut his sandwiches into lightning-bolt shaped fingers. They'd also made little broomsticks and Snitches out of his asparagus and mash. What was he, five? As he picked at his food, Hermione and Ron passed on a stream of get-well messages from his friends.

"Everyone wanted to come and see you," said Ron, "but Mum said no. Took an *hour* to get rid of Lavender. Parvati, too. Wouldn't stop crying. Floo fire was going so long that Ashwinders started poppin' out and laying eggs all over the house. Ginny's still trying to find them all."

"Did you happen to talk to Neville?" Harry asked Ron.

"Yeah," replied Ron vaguely, as he poked through Harry's tray, plucking out his pudding, "he says hi. You want this?"

"Could you get a message to him for me?"

"What am I, your ruddy secretary?"

Harry knew Ron wasn't anywhere near as put out as he sounded, rather he was actually bubbling up with relief and affection — well, that and hunger.

"Just tell him to come see me when he can," said Harry.

Ron mumbled an affirmative through a mouthful of fluorescent-orange jelly. "I'm starbing! Mum didn't ab time ta make lunch."

"Why didn't you just make your *own* lunch?" laughed Hermione.

Ron blinked, bewildered. A buzzing sounded and he carefully opened an inner pocket of his robes.

"G'day, Bruce," said Harry, as Bruce, the emerald-green blowfly, flew down and inspected Harry's lunch tray before settling on Ron's jelly.

Hermione's face screwed up in disgust. "That is so unhygienic!"

"Who're you calling unhygienic?" said Ron indignantly. "He had a bath with me just this morning!"

"That is just *way* too much information," laughed Harry. Ron grinned and offered him a spoonful of jelly. Harry politely declined.

"What are the Healers saying about your Wheel of Anxiety?" asked Hermione.

Harry didn't want to keep things from his best friends, but he just *knew* that if he said anything about his encounters with Kreacher or the others, Hermione would set the Healers onto him in a heartbeat.

He shrugged and said, "She reckons I'll survive — and apparently I've got a lot of soul."

Ron snickered and helped himself to an asparagus broomstick. A dove's coo sounded and Harry smiled inwardly with relief; his salts must be going up again.

"Oh, almost forgot," Ron said, dumping a brown-papered package in Harry's lap. "From that Natalie," he muttered, picking through Harry's lightning-bolts, trying to find something that wasn't corned beef.

Hermione frowned sternly at Ron and pushed the lunch tray firmly back towards Harry, who was struggling with numb fingertips to open Natalie's package. Hermione opened it for him. It was some kind of leather journal, empty but for the first page. Harry had Hermione read the message to him.

Dear Harry,

The tabloids seem to be having another field day. I saw a ridiculous article with photos of you and me in the London Sunday Prophet. What a melodrama! So, I have now been, how did my brother so kindly put it, 'internationally dumped!' Why oh why am I not an only child!! Oh well, I imagine I shall get over you eventually! (Flutters hand over heart in pathetic girly way!)

Hermione did the appropriate hand fluttering, earning a snicker from Ron.

"I think I like this Natalie," he decided, "nice to know there's at least one girl on the planet who's immune to the charms of our celebrity midget." Hermione was more impressed that she took the newspaper article so well. "Yeah," Ron agreed emphatically. "I mean, the paper made her out to be some kind of a —"

The redhead stopped and Hermione tried to hide a smile.

"A scarlet woman?" she prompted helpfully, though Harry didn't think that was the word Ron had in mind. Hermione turned back to Natalie's letter.

So anyway, on to a more interesting subject: how was the party?!!!! I can spill now, so tell me all about that Wheel thing, what was it called ... The Wheel of Anxiety or something? And the truth mints — did anyone have to reveal anything seriously cringe-worthy? And the Quidditch games! Do you really have your own Quidditch pitch? I am so jealous! Did Viktor Krum really come to your party?! Did you play against him? That must have been so cool!

Hermione spared a smirk for Ron, who merely grunted then swallowed a lightning-bolt.

And the feasts and everything else the boys told me about!! I want details!!! DETAILS!!!

I guess I should explain what I'm writing in. This is a WizChat journal. My Dad invented them, so I don't know if you've used one before (ignore this if you have!). Anyway, if you haven't, just write 'Ave Natalie Ramsay' then your message then sign off 'Vale Harry Potter'. Then the message will appear in my WizChat here in Canada. When you send a message, the other journal glows, and if you're really antsy for a reply, add 'Quid novi?' after your signature. (Our godmother hates it when I do that — haha!)

Write soon! Big hugs,

Natalie

P.S. And don't forget you promised to send party photos!

Hermione happily volunteered to fetch a photo album and make up a 'nice selection' for Natalie.

"Get one for, Neville, too," said Harry, though it wasn't really Neville he was thinking of. "I haven't got him a birthday present yet."

Hermione nodded and turned to examining the WizChat. "You know, I've read about these."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look: of course she had.

"They're big in North America," Hermione noted, turning the journal over in her hands, "but they've never really taken off here. And they're terribly expensive, but I guess if her father invented them ..."

"A family of inventors then," Ron observed, impressed. Hermione looked perplexed. "Harry's godmother," Ron reminded her. A wicked smile grew on Ron's freckled face. "You don't know who she is," he stated incredulously. "Oh, this is too good!"

"What is? Harry?"

"Don't you dare tell her," Ron warned Harry. "I want to savour the moment."

"What are you going on about?" snapped Hermione.

Propped up in bed, Harry shifted into a more comfortable position from which to enjoy the show his best friends were putting on for him: Hermione's frustration that Ron could know something significant that she didn't; Ron's glee for the very same reason. Bruce the blowfly looped a loop.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Hermione," Ron sighed, shaking his head sadly. "I mean, I would've thought you, of all people, would've known. Clearly, you've not been paying enough attention in *Potions*."

"*Potions*?" snapped Hermione.

“Elizabeth — Elizabeth Ramsay ...”

Hermione shook her head crossly. “What about Elizabeth Ram —” Hermione’s mouth fell open in shock. “Wolfsbane! She invented the Wolfsbane Potion!”

Ron snickered condescendingly before turning to Harry to say, “Took her long enough.”

Harry knew Ron would never have remembered such a detail without the inspiration of a tasty Chocolate Frog, but neither of them was going to admit that to their favourite know-it-all. Hermione’s indignation quickly transfigured into excitement at having access to such a superb Potions Mistress.

“She’s fit,” Ron agreed. “Wouldn’t mind having *her* for Potions. Imagine getting rid of Snape.”

Both Harry and Ron groaned with longing at that happy thought.

“You know, I still can’t believe he did such a poor job on that Summoning Charm,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Well, he did!” Harry said shortly. “Why are you always defending him?”

The mood in the room chilled. Ron eyed Harry anxiously. Hermione opened her mouth to launch into what was probably going to be a very logical speech. Ron never gave her that chance.

“Lupin says it was an accident, and so does Dumbledore!” he declared. “And if Harry believes them, that’s the end of it. Or are you doubting Dumbledore now?”

Hermione’s face flushed. “No, I never said —”

“Didn’t Dumbledore just save Harry from You-Know-Who?” Ron railed. “Why would he protect Snape if there was any doubt? Just drop it! The stupid great bat can’t charm his way out of a paper bag and that’s the end of the story!”

Her lips pursed, Hermione yielded the point, but she couldn’t possibly not have the last word.

“If Dumbledore says so, of course,” she agreed stiffly, “but it must have been an extraordinarily complicated charm.”

Harry felt Ron’s anger dissipating as quickly as it had risen. He had a shrewd idea his touchiness had more to do with the fright he’d had over losing his best friend than any secret faith in Snape. In any case, Harry was more than happy for the subject to move along.

“So,” Ron said, sneaking another lightning bolt, “when are they gonna let you out, anyway? Mum said something about next week, but you’ll wanna get out before the game —”

“He’ll get out sooner if he can eat his own lunch,” sounded a stern voice from the doorway.

It was Remus — and Elizabeth, too. Ron sheepishly sneaked Harry’s banana back on his tray whilst Hermione launched herself at Elizabeth, gushing over the Wolfsbane Potion and peppering the witch with questions. Remus sent her, Ron, and Hermione off to the cafeteria for lunch.

“Well, that’s Hermione entertained for the rest of the day,” he remarked dryly.

Harry tried to smile, but it was hard work; did Remus not want him to see Elizabeth at all? If Harry had to choose between them, he’d choose Remus, no question, but he really hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“Remus, you and Elizabeth,” he started hesitantly, “would you rather I not see her?”

Remus’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Not at all, not at all — I just wanted to see how you’re doing. I can call her back if you like ...?” He motioned towards the door but Harry demurred, inspiring one of Remus’s shrewd looks. “Harry, fate may not have been kind to Elizabeth and me, but I don’t want that to interfere with the two of *you* getting to know each other. I know *she* would like that, and I would, too,” he added firmly. “Don’t ever be worried about that. When you were young, your family refused all contact, and your aunt was particularly set against Lizzie; she even threatened to break your sanctuary if she ever tried to seek you out uninvited.”

Harry had already guessed as much from the phone calls earlier in the summer — that his aunt had blackmailed his godmother into staying away — but Remus seemed oddly keen for him to like her. It made Harry even more curious as to why they broke up. Remus, however, was more interested in the Healers’ post-bath instructions — and Harry’s lunch tray. He tugged it closer and sniffed suspiciously.

“Did you eat *any* of your own lunch?”

“... And have you had other problems controlling your reflexive magic in the past?”

Harry just stared at the Saint Mungo’s Psycho-Healer, trying hard not to laugh.

“Ah, well, I guess if you count blowing up your aunt,” he said, counting off on his fingers, “accidentally jumping on top of the school roof, turning your teacher’s hair blue —”

Harry broke off as Ron, returned from lunch and sitting on a stool behind the Healer's back, snorted appreciatively. The Psycho-Healer's eyes squeezed shut, as if in pain.

"Harry, dear," she said, flicking her eyes meaningfully over her shoulder, "are you *sure* you wouldn't rather we spoke in private?"

Harry was actually *quite* sure of what he wanted — and it didn't involve spilling his guts to a total stranger. In fact, he'd been dead against seeing the witch at all, complaining bitterly to Remus that if word got out he was seeing some kind of shrink, everyone would think he was a total loony. His guardian, however, made it clear that Harry would not be going home before *all* of the Healers requirements were satisfied.

It had taken Harry all of two minutes to realise that no matter what he said to the Psycho-Healer (who reminded him forcibly of Sibyll Trelawney) she was going to spin it all out of shape and make him look completely mental anyway. He decided early on that he might as well have some fun with her. He gazed up at her now with mournful eyes.

"But I *need* my Wheezy," he said tragically. "What if those Heliopaths come back again and fly me away in their golden chariot?"

The Psycho-Healer clicked her tongue sympathetically, and her Psycho-Quill filled another two pages of notes on her clipboard. Ron was biting his knuckles so hard his eyes were watering.

"Now, Harry," the Healer continued soothingly, brushing a fly from her face, "all this anger you've been feeling — I think we really need to work on getting you in touch with your feminine side —"

Ron fell off his stool.

"Really, young man," complained the Healer, twisting around, "I must insist that if you're going to stay, then you — pfft — what is it with this fly?"

The witch swiped irritably again at Bruce. Harry licked his lips with anticipation as she drew her wand.

"You know what, Ron?" Harry said brightly as the Psycho-Healer ran screaming out the door in a haze of angry blowflies. "Remus was right — I do feel much better."

Elizabeth sighed inwardly. Hermione's endless — though admittedly intelligent — questions made her feel like she was sitting her Potions' NEWT all over again. When Remus joined them, he glanced shrewdly at Elizabeth's barely touched salad and said, "Did Hermione happen to mention she's fond of Potions?"

"She might have mentioned it," Elizabeth replied with a small wink to the girl, who smiled bashfully and excused herself to return to Harry.

Over lunch, Remus brought Elizabeth up to date with the fatal flaw in the Summoning Charm, but it was Harry's recent vision from Lord Voldemort that alarmed her more than anything else.

"What kind of vision?" she asked.

Remus hesitated. "I'm sorry, Lizzie, I promised Harry. He's not in the most trusting mood at the moment ..."

"Oh ... right. No, of course," agreed Elizabeth, frowning slightly. "Did he say whether he'd been experiencing any other astral phenomena?"

Remus blinked. "Er, I'm not sure ... he said something about people screaming all night ..."

Elizabeth nodded distractedly. "I know the Healers said to expect extreme mood swings, but, to be honest, I'm more worried about him being able to close his mind."

Remus leaned forward. "Do you think you could give him some tips?"

"Of course," Elizabeth said at once, "but he might not respond to me; you really need to learn Occlumency from someone you know and trust."

"Ah ..." said Remus.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," he replied wryly, "I just wish you'd been here last Christmas."

"Do you?" Elizabeth asked tightly.

Remus's face fell. "Lizzie, I'm sorry — that was a daft thing to say."

"It's fine," Elizabeth lied, sinking back into the padded banquette. "You were asking about Occlumency?"

"Lizzie," Remus said, leaning closer, "you have to believe I had *no* idea Harry didn't already know about you. Sirius said Petunia already told Harry about his godparents, but he was wrong. Harry said he only found out by chance. Believe me, I *never* wanted to exclude you from Harry's life." Some of the weight pressing down on Elizabeth lifted, and she nodded silently. "Lizzie, we need to talk about last night. What I said ... I didn't mean you weren't wanted."

He reached for her hand, but Elizabeth whipped it away.

"Don't — don't make me do this — it's hard enough holding things together without you —" She stopped and shook her head. "Look, just one thing at a time."

Remus looked miserable. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I didn't mean to upset you. I just ..."

"Just Harry," she pleaded, "I can't deal with anything more right now."

"Just Harry," Remus agreed tightly. A heavy silence fell, broken finally by Elizabeth.

"Remy, I do want to talk," she said faintly, leaning forward, "just not here — not now — but soon."

It was a few moments before they realised their fingers had become entwined, and they self-consciously drew back, their hands separated once more by two inches and ten years.

"I'll get the coffee," Remus suggested hoarsely, returning a short while later with two steaming mugs. "So ... about Harry ... you haven't really had a chance to talk to him yet. The Healers should be done with him by now. Why don't you go down and have a chat?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start," she admitted, her insides twisting at the very thought. "How can I even *begin* to make amends for what happened?"

"You weren't to know," Remus insisted for the *n*th time since they found Harry. "Look, just go down and talk to him. He could surprise you; he's a truly remarkable boy."

"What's he like, Remy?" she asked wistfully.

Remus slowly smiled — his face lighting up piece by piece. Elizabeth's heart ached; she'd missed that smile so.

"He's James and Lily's son, there's no question about that. A true Gryffindor: courageous, fiercely loyal, fearless in battle, he's not one to give in or give up. He's brave, but he's not usually one to pick a fight, though his temper's got the better of him at times this past year. He can be surprisingly vulnerable, though he rarely shows it. He misses his parents most of all, I think. Their deaths haunt him still ..."

Remus stared thoughtfully into his coffee, perhaps haunted by a few bad memories of his own. But then he smiled again, ruefully this time.

"He's frighteningly self-reliant. It scares me to death knowing how prone he is to take matters into his own hands. He's had little reason to trust people in his life, and yet he will if he knows they're being straight with him. And he's got quite a dose of pride; he holds his dignity quite sacred," Remus's smile twisted at the thought, "not unlike most teenage boys, I suppose. And his mother ... he managed to get kicked off his Quidditch team after punching out someone who insulted Lily's honour."

Elizabeth smiled reminiscently. "Sounds like James ..."

"Ah, that's another thing," Remus said. "He hasn't been too impressed with tales of James's less inspiring moments at school. If there's one thing Harry detests it's a bully."

"James *could* be a bit of a prat," conceded Elizabeth. "But he managed to pull his head in eventually."

"True ... but Harry's not too fussed on being compared with his father just because he looks so much like him."

"Ah," said Elizabeth, nodding. "Good to know. What kinds of things does he like? He plays Quidditch, I gather."

"Yes, he's an exceptional Seeker."

"And the guitar?"

Remus drained his mug and pushed it away. "And now you're stalling. Come on, my lovely, time to face the music."

On returning down the stairs, Remus groaned deeply and hurried Elizabeth past a poor Healer beset by a cloud of flies.

Harry smiled benignly at Remus as he and Elizabeth re-entered the CCU. Catching Hermione's eye, Harry tipped his head a little, inspiring her to spring to her feet and declare that she and Ron needed to go to Diagon Alley for duplication potions. Ron was duly underwhelmed by the prospect until she suggested a side-trip to Honeydukes.

"Fudge!" Harry called after them.

"Right," Remus said, clapping his hands, "I need to pay a visit to the Headmaster. I'm sure you two have a lot to catch up on. Play nice."

Within moments, godmother and godson were alone. The silence seemed to get louder. Elizabeth toyed nervously with her wand.

"May I?" Harry asked, nodding towards the wand. She handed it over without question. He squinted closely at the wood and grinned when he found two small tooth marks. "Sorry about that," he said, handing it back.

Elizabeth's jaw fell. "How ...?"

Having had his fun with the Psycho-Healer, Harry was determined now to make a good impression.

"Hi, I'm Harry," he said, smiling gamely, "pleased to meet you again."

Elizabeth shook his offered hand. "Elizabeth ... my — my friends call me Lizzie."

"Thank you for coming to see me," Harry said very politely, but this just seemed to make his godmother feel worse. "Erm ... would you like to sit down?"

Elizabeth pulled up a stool next to him and sat down gingerly, like a cat, ready to leap off again.

"Harry, I'm so sorry about what happened."

Still without his spectacles, Harry needed to squint to make out the small woman's face. She looked anxious and tired; her eyes were red and puffy. With a sudden rush of understanding, he realised she felt responsible for sending him through the boiler and expected — needed — to be punished.

"It was pretty bad," he admitted. Elizabeth nodded mutely. Harry was about to try to convince her it wasn't her fault but stopped himself. "Let's not do that again," he said instead.

"No," agreed Elizabeth faintly. "Never."

"So ..." said Harry, "you live in Canada. That must be nice. What's it like there?"

"Oh, you know," Elizabeth said weakly. "Big."

Silence fell and Harry tried again; his godmother was still a bundle of nerves.

"So you invented Remus's potion — that's really cool." Elizabeth nodded slightly. "I mean, it's brilliant — I only met Remus because of the Wolfsbane Potion. It meant he could work at Hogwarts — well, for a while anyway. So ..." Harry paused and blew out his cheeks; this was hard going. "I bet Hermione had a million questions for you."

Elizabeth choked a laugh. "Something like that."

"Don't think you've heard the end of it," Harry warned her. "She'll talk your ear off for *days* if you let her."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind," Elizabeth said wryly.

"So, how *did* you get in?" he asked curiously. "Remus said something about another property."

"Sirius never told you?"

Harry shook his head. Elizabeth went to the door, spoke briefly with the guards, then cast an Imperturbable Charm on the room. Returning to Harry's bedside, she told him all about Black Island: how it had belonged to Sirius's uncle; how she and Sirius had holidayed there together as children; how Sirius had fled there on Buckbeak after escaping the Ministry's Dementors at Hogwarts.

"And you say you can get there from the grandfather clock?" checked Harry, both bemused and ticked off that he'd never thought to climb inside the old clock. "Do you think I could go there?"

"You'd best consult with Remus on that," Elizabeth said carefully, then her lips twitched and she added conspiratorially, "though I imagine if we ganged up on him, he might be persuaded." She inclined her head a little and added meaningfully, "It was Sirius's safest refuge. It could be that for you, too, if you like."

Harry nodded thoughtfully; sounded like a plan to him. "What about his cousins? Do they know about it?"

"No, at least I don't think so. Alphard was quite an outcast within his family. Most of them wouldn't even talk to him, let alone allow him anywhere near their children. They were always worried he'd give them ideas. Mrs Black wanted nothing to do with him or his 'rat-infested rock' as she called it."

"Does the Order know about it?"

"I'm not sure, Harry. Sirius was even more secretive about the island than Alphard; he hadn't even told Remus." Elizabeth smiled faintly. "In a way, the island was sacred to him, somewhere he could forget all the evils of the world. But that made it very lonely, too. Sirius was never really one to care how he was living; he'd live in a cave if it meant he could be close to the people he cared about. He —" Elizabeth broke off. Harry could feel her heart clenching as she said in a low voice, "He never could bear to be alone for long."

Elizabeth's grief over Sirius's death tore at Harry. He knew with aching certainty exactly how she felt.

"He lived in a cave near Hogwarts once," he offered, "to be close to me ... we'd bring him food ..."

Elizabeth smiled weakly; Harry could tell she was trying desperately to hold it together for him. He watched curiously as she briefly closed her

eyes. The pain submerged again, as if swallowed by the Giant Squid. It was only a few seconds, but when she started talking again, she was calm once more.

"There are caves on the island, too," she said, "grottoes and waterfalls. We had some rather grand adventures when we were little." Elizabeth smiled reminiscently. "We'd stage great naval battles in the lake; Uncle Alphard had the best toy pirates. He left the island to Sirius in his Will of course."

"Right ..." said Harry slowly, "so no one lives there now?"

"Actually, there are quite a few animals and birds living there, and the house-elves, of course. They —"

Elizabeth broke off and sucked in a breath.

"They what?" Harry prompted warily; he didn't fancy the prospect of having *more* Kreachers to deal with.

"Lovey and Dovey," Elizabeth said faintly. "They were devoted to Sirius, they don't know he's ... I — I'll have to pay them a visit and let them know he's gone."

Another painful surge of emotion rose within Elizabeth and, once again, though nothing of it showed on her face, Harry felt the pain being quietly swallowed down.

"Wish I could do that," Harry said longingly.

Elizabeth looked mystified. "Talk to Lovey and Dovey?"

"No, sorry, I didn't mean that. Erm, I just wondered, are you an Occlumens?"

"Ah, yes, actually. I'm accredited to level six."

Harry nodded slightly. "Cool ... I didn't know there were levels ..."

"Don't be *too* impressed. It goes all the way to level twelve."

"Still ..." said Harry slowly, "bet it's useful ..."

Elizabeth regarded him shrewdly.

"This place can be very — demanding," she suggested. "Are you having trouble closing your mind, Harry?"

"Yes!" Harry said, relieved to be able to talk to someone who would actually understand. And he didn't dare tell the Healers lest they lock him up in a padded cell. "I get all caught up in other people's nightmares, people being tortured and stuff. It's only when I'm asleep, but I don't know if I can handle another night like last night."

Elizabeth nodded sympathetically. "I could show you some blocking methods, if you like."

Harry moistened his lips; it was a tempting offer, but his Occlumency lessons with Snape had always just left him feeling weaker.

"I don't know ... would you be attacking my mind?"

"Not at all — just describing a few techniques," she said soothingly. "I'd never try to force my way into your mind without your permission."

Harry wasn't entirely convinced it wouldn't hurt, but he knew he needed to do *something*.

"Is it normal to feel ... you know, stuff?" he started hesitantly.

"Stuff," Elizabeth repeated blankly.

"Other people's stuff ... erm, you know, when they're happy or sad or ..."

"Oh, *stuff*," she said, nodding sagely. "You mean Soul Static." At Harry's relieved nod, Elizabeth explained further. "When you feel something strongly, your emotions manifest in some physical way: a raised heartbeat, a blush in the cheeks, that sort of thing. When you add magical auras into the equation, things get a bit more — intense. Over-excited auras can cause hair to crackle with electricity, eyes to flash, skin to prickle, even accidental magic." She waited for Harry's nod before continuing. "My guess is that right now you're accidentally picking up static from any strong auras you encounter. Wizarding auras can be very draining to a sensitive soul."

"I'm not sensitive," Harry complained. "They're loud."

"Of course," Elizabeth wisely agreed, "not sensitive. Silly word. Erm, the thing is, your soul is incredibly over-charged at the moment and, until it settles down, you're bound to pick up on a few things you'd rather not. We'll definitely work on mental shielding, but perhaps after dinner? You need your rest, and I imagine your friends are keen to continue their visit."

Harry nodded more contentedly — happy to know there would be something to look forward to in trying to block out the other minds and also that he'd have a bit of time to prepare himself first.

"Shall I ...?" Elizabeth asked, pointing her wand to the door. At Harry's nod, she lifted the Imperturbable Charm, unlocked the door, and invited Ron and Hermione back in, Hermione tottering under a pile of albums and potions, Ron bearing fudge.

"I got a letter from Natalie today," Harry said to Elizabeth, through a mouthful of fudge, "and she sent me some journal ..."

"Oh, one of Julius's WizChats," she said. "Lovely. If you need any help —"

Hermione's hand shot up, making everyone laugh. Elizabeth was obliged to demonstrate all the features of the WizChat, including the magical 'Doodle' for instantaneous messages located on the inside back page. The Doodle scrolled up and down by caressing the edge of the journal. It was also charmed to identify the person writing, to guard against impostors, though people could always provide nicknames for their friends.

"Natalie has me down as 'Darling, stop that,'" Elizabeth confided to Harry.

Harry chuckled throatily and received a shy smile from his godmother. It was a start.

Ron and Hermione kept Harry company whilst Elizabeth went shopping for 'supplies' for his lesson. The fudge gone, Ron peered over Hermione's shoulder and clicked his tongue in disbelief at the lengthy essay she was writing to Natalie.

"Why can't you just write shorter?" he said.

"Natalie will want a proper explanation about everything that's been happening," Hermione replied serenely. "And anyway, if something's not worth taking your time to say well, then it's really not worth saying at all, now, is it?"

Ron stared at her. "Right. Give it here."

Hermione signed off with a flourish and passed the journal — and a withering glare — to Ron. Ron scribbled a few to-the-point observations, signed off, and was rewarded thirty seconds later with a glowing WizChat. Harry was well chuffed — a message from all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. Ron found Natalie on the Doodle page at the back of the journal.

"Ron, what happened to Harry?!" he read out loud. "Is he okay? Hermione started talking about mercurial water. Does he have to drink it? She didn't explain what that was."

Hermione shot a filthy look at Ron, whose laughter stopped immediately.

"Well, I *would* have if you'd let me finish," she said acerbically, snatching the WizChat back.

Harry knew Natalie wasn't going to be hearing from anyone else any time soon. It turned out he was wrong. Within ten minutes, Hermione, looking a little hurt, passed the WizChat back to Ron.

"She's asking for you. She wants to know about the Hive."

Ron grinned hugely. "I *knew* I liked this girl! Come on, Bruce."

Commandeering the WizChat, Ron settled cross-legged on the floor beneath Harry's quietly fluttering heart-chart. Not to be outdone, Hermione busied herself making up photo albums. For his part, Harry slept — whenever the Healers let him. Penelope Clearwater kept waking him up to pump him with potions: turquoise for strength, silver for wit-sharpening, puce for potency (Harry didn't ask), ivory for hardening his bones, and a great mess of other ones, all sludge-like and revolting. He also received a steady stream of visitors from the Order of the Phoenix, their visits kept blessedly short by a vigilant Penelope. When dinnertime came, Hermione went home with the Weasleys to The Burrow for dinner (Harry couldn't blame her; Remus's cooking left a lot to be desired). As Ron left, he nudged Harry with the WizChat.

"Mind if I ...?" he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. He had been huddled over the WizChat with Natalie for hours.

"You *do* realise how far away Canada is?" Harry said, smirking.

Ron went a little pink and hurried his mother up, nearly bowling over Remus, who was coming back in.

"I had a long talk with Professor Dumbledore this afternoon," he offered, watching Harry push his dinner around his plate, "and we agreed there should be an inquest into your accident. Don't worry — not for the actual Summoning; I'm satisfied that was an accident. I just want to make sure *nothing* like this can ever happen again."

Harry was all for that.

"Come on, eat up," said Remus.

Harry blew out his cheeks and took a stab at a piece of carrot.

Remus inclined his head a little. "How did it go with Lizzie? She was nervous as a cat about seeing you."

"Okay," said Harry, shrugging a little. "She's going to give me an Occlumency lesson."

"Good, good," said Remus, patting Harry's leg.

Penelope came by to collect his dinner tray and left him with two nips of courage, a hi-ball of wit, and a shot of cheer. Harry tossed them all back resignedly. The Healers didn't seem to have much faith in letting him handle his own feelings. As he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, he eyed his guardian shrewdly.

"You and Elizabeth still seem close," he suggested.

"I hope we always will be," Remus returned.

"But you split up ..."

"True."

When it became evident that that was all Remus Lupin was going to say on the subject, Harry said shamelessly, "Come on, Moony, give me something."

Remus demurred. "It's complicated ..."

"You still fancy her," Harry said gamely, "and she still fancies you, so what's the problem?"

Remus looked thoroughly discomposed. "I really don't think we should be having this conversation right now."

"Okay," Harry agreed with a secret smile.

"I mean, what's between me and my wife ..."

"Should stay between you and your wife," Harry assured him, relaxing into his pillows. Remus's aura revealed he was actually bursting with curiosity.

After a few moments, Remus rubbed a hand through his hair and said, "It's not that you shouldn't be able to ask about these things ..."

"Not a problem," Harry said serenely, thoroughly enjoying himself. A battle of wills waged inside Remus. Curiosity triumphed.

"Did Lizzie ... she didn't happen to say something to you?"

"It's okay, Moony," Harry said in a saintly voice. "You're absolutely right: it really is none of my business."

A crooked smile grew on Remus's face. "Alright, you rotten little sod, spit it out. What do you think you know?"

Leaning forward, Harry lowered his voice conspiratorially to say, "Well, she's dead keen, but she's scared, too. I dunno, it's like ..." Harry chewed at his lip. "Look, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but it's pretty rough when someone gives up on you. I reckon she might be up for getting back together, but she's not sure if she's wanted."

Remus couldn't seem to find anything to say to that, but he was definitely standing a bit taller when he left to 'find Lizzie'.

After a quick trip to Diagon Alley, Elizabeth located the potions lab in Black House that Hermione told her about, cleared a space for her tent, then fetched her cauldrons and set about brewing a Brain-Booster Potion of her own recipe for Harry as well as a drop of Strengthening Solution for herself. The familiar smells, the repetitive tasks, the busy fingers — just having something useful to do — all contributed to helping relax her uneasy mind. At the end of the workbench, her rucksack was not so happy.

"Yes, I know, darling," she told Evil, who was pawing at the glowing and trembling bag, "but I'll be here all day if I stop to answer my WizChat."

Elizabeth surrendered when her bag started whistling at her. Opening her journal, she found a several unread messages from Natalie, and jotted a quick reply. Within minutes, the journal was glowing again.

Hi Auntie Lizzie,

No prob. I know all about it. I'm just Doodling with Ron Weasley. I can't wait until you come home, but I'm really glad you went to visit Harry. He needs you more than I do right now. Give him a big hug from me!

Lots of love,

Nat

P.S. Now what's all this I hear about Uncle Remus? Do I smell romance? Do I need to come over and play chaperone? I never realised Harry's guardian was your ex. My, my, the Kneazle's amongst the pixies now! Mwah!

Elizabeth read the post-script twice. Cheeky little sod, she thought wryly and turned back to her potions. Within half an hour, the WizChat was glowing again. This time, she found her brother Julius on her Doodle page.

J. Ramsay: Natalie tells me you're in London.

E. Ramsay: Hello to you, too, Jules. How was your holiday?

J. Ramsay: Why are you there? Is it business?

Elizabeth chewed at her lip. Julius would go nuts if he knew she was staying in the same house as Remus Lupin. He'd never forgiven his brother-in-law for deserting his baby sister.

E. Ramsay: Just a social visit. I'd rather not get into it right now.

J. Ramsay: It's him, isn't it? Haven't you thrown away enough of your life on that man? Your place is here with your family!

The sharp sound of a hissing cat startled Evil. Elizabeth angrily altered her Doodle name.

E. Lupin: Quite.

J. Ramsay: You are NOT starting up with that man again!!

Livid, Elizabeth slammed the WizChat shut.

"Everything okay in here?" asked an amused voice.

Her face hot, Elizabeth gripped hard her WizChat, which was aggressively trying to reopen itself.

"Remus — I didn't know you were back."

She cast a foul look towards Evil, who merely curled around Remus's legs, purring. Remus leaned casually into the doorjamb and smiled at all the frothing, burping cauldrons.

"How did it go with Harry?" he asked pleasantly.

"He was a perfect gentleman and I was a complete idiot," she said, to which Remus chuckled softly. "It went well," she admitted, "too well, really. I wish he'd just blown up at me. *That* I could deal with. I think some of your horrid equanimity must be rubbing off on him."

"Sorry," he said, not looking sorry at all. His eyes drifted around the room, and his smile stiffened when he saw the tent. "I was going to organise a proper bedroom for you upstairs ..."

"Oh ... no, this is fine — I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"There are a dozen bedrooms upstairs," Remus objected, "you don't want to be living out of a tent — not when you don't have to — not if you're going to be here a while." He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and looked up at her through his lanky brown hair. "You are staying a while, aren't you?"

Elizabeth started to answer, but her WizChat was still putting up a good fight for her attention, and she was obliged to stun it before it started ripping out its own pages.

"A while," she agreed faintly.

When Elizabeth arrived for their Occlumency lesson, Harry groaned inwardly at the sight of yet another potion.

"I'm pretty right," he tried to say, wondering what he'd done to earn such a punishment. "The Healers probably wouldn't want me mixing potions ..."

"I already checked it with them," Elizabeth assured him.

The potion looked icy cold; condensation beaded on the steel container. A curly drinking-straw promised a scrumptious treat, but the young Gryffindor was not to be so easily conned; he was confident it would taste revolting. Forlornly, he peered inside, his fears vindicated on seeing a concoction the colour and consistency of frothy swamp-water. With Elizabeth watching him, all hopeful and trusting, he took a tentative sip and did a double-take. It tasted delicious!

"Nice," he said, rapidly slurping his way towards the bottom of the swamp. "What's in it?"

"Oh, a few things: blueberries, banana, ginkgo biloba, sage, rosemary, just a drop of blessed thistle, gotu kola, peach nectar, and some of Florean Fortescue's finest peach gelato."

Elizabeth started her lesson by waving off the charmed daylight, making Harry's room feel much less clinical but not that easy to see in. Then she asked him to choose a mandala from a collection of painted-metal meditation discs. A small smile played on Harry's lips to think of how different this lesson was to Snape's.

"Which is the best one to use?" he asked, holding the mandalas close to see; he was still without his glasses.

"There isn't really a 'best,'" said Elizabeth. "A mandala is just a pictorial tool for helping you meditate. You want something complex enough to

represent the interconnectedness of all things within the unity of the one but simple enough for your mind to remember intimately."

Harry blinked. "Right ... so, which one do you think?"

Elizabeth conceded a self-deprecating chuckle. "Sorry, that *was* rather a lot of gibberish. You're looking for an image to help calm yourself, something that's tranquil but can hold your attention."

"I tried something like that once before," said Harry. "Hermione gave me a broomstick-servicing kit for my birthday and I memorised the handbook. I'd recite bits to myself when I was trying to keep my temper."

"Really?" Elizabeth said interestedly. "Yes, that's the very kind of thing I'm talking about. Did it work for you?"

Harry's lips twisted into a wry smile at the memory of Aunt Marge bouncing on the ceiling. "Not really."

"Written codas can be much more difficult to get your head around," Elizabeth conceded. "There's the Emerald Tablet, of course, and other Hermetic texts encapsulating the secrets of the cosmos." Elizabeth grinned at Harry's blank expression and added in a stage whisper, "Pictures are way more fun."

She picked out a mandala with the simple black and white spiral of a sea-snail and compared it with the stars of a spiral galaxy. Her fingers traced the curves in the raised enamel disc, then she gave it to Harry to do the same. He complied self-consciously whilst she rabbited on and on about snails and spirals: how a snail's shell was a home for one, compared with a galaxy being a home to every living thing; how the shell was symbolic of death and rebirth because a snail could seal itself inside and hibernate when times were bad; and then the spiral, itself: how a spiral was like a whirlwind, spinning frenetically, but quiet and still at the dead centre: how treasures might be found in the core of a spiral, like in the centre of a labyrinth.

She said, "You'll find that the more familiar you become with your mandala, the more it will become a refuge where you can find peace and reason with familiar thoughts when everything else seems so frantic and disordered. Half an hour at bedtime would be ideal. But for *tonight* we need to equip you with some good blocking techniques, as well."

Harry sat up more attentively and Elizabeth quizzed him on what Shield Charms he knew.

"Patronus, right, and Protego, too? Excellent. Same principles, but you hold the shield within your own mind. Protego shielding is best for repulsing specific, intrusive thoughts and visions, just as it is with repulsing specific hexes, whilst Patronus spirit guardians are more effective for emotional attacks. More advanced blocks can be created with complex layering of positive thoughts, but that might be a bit ambitious for today."

They worked for a time on concentration exercises for fixing and holding tranquil mandala-related thoughts. In fixing them, Harry found it easiest to conjure a kind of flying stag circling the corners of his mind, guarding him from intrusive thoughts.

"Would you like to try a small test?" Elizabeth invited him.

Harry had been dreading this moment. He nodded and braced himself for attack.

"Relax," she said, "we'll start small. Okay, close your eyes. I want you to think about something simple, maybe eating an apple. Got that? Right ... take a great bite ... feel the jolt in your teeth as you bite into it ... feel the moisture sucked up into your mouth ... see the red skin surrounding the —"

"It's a green apple," said Harry.

"... the green skin surrounding the white flesh of the fruit," Elizabeth continued, adding dryly, "I'm sure there must be a worm in this apple. Ooo ... better yet, half a worm."

"Ew! Thanks very much!" laughed Harry.

"Eyes shut," chided Elizabeth. "I want you to be thinking about biting into that *green* worm-filled apple. I want you to block me. Ready? Legilimens!"

Harry's stag easily butted Elizabeth away.

"I did it!" he declared happily. "I could feel you kind of ... bouncing off."

"You did indeed," Elizabeth said, nodding encouragingly. "Let's try again. I'm going to use a bit more force this time. Ready? Legilimens!"

Harry sensed Elizabeth get a glimpse of green before being blocked.

"Not bad," she said, nodding, "but I think you need to strengthen your block a bit, or try using several thoughts together."

They tried several times more and each time Harry would react more quickly and effectively.

"You're holding back, aren't you?" he complained. "I need you to give me your best shot. I can take it."

Elizabeth was unconvinced, and no amount of bravado from Harry would change her mind.

"You're weaker than you realise, Harry," she said sternly.

"And this place is mad as a bag of snakes!" countered Harry.

Elizabeth gave in — a little. "I'll use as much force as you're likely to face here, okay?"

Harry nodded and braced himself.

"*Legilimens!*" said Elizabeth.

A shining green apple, whole and perfect, appeared in Harry's mind. He tried to block Elizabeth, tried to push her away, but she held fast. The apple grew more blurry — indistinct — not an object any more, just a colour. Slowly, Harry repulsed her completely from his mind.

"Excellent!" cried Elizabeth. "Oh, are you all right?"

Harry's hands shook as he sipped at the glass of water she held to his lips. "No, I'm good, good. I really felt it that time — it was good."

He wanted to keep practicing but Elizabeth flatly refused. "Your technique is good enough for now and any more practice will just wear you out. Right now, I just want you to relax and focus on calming your mind. You look very tense."

Closing his eyes, Harry tried harder to relax. It wasn't easy. He was having considerable difficulty stopping wondering why Snape couldn't have taught him all this.

"Sorry," he muttered, opening his eyes only to see his godmother wave his apology away.

"This might help," she suggested.

She pressed a finger to the centre of his mandala, and the sea-snail started spinning hypnotically, which worked a treat in emptying Harry's mind. His head calmer, he imagined crawling into and curling up inside his shell. Sleep came almost immediately, and he managed to stay in his own head for several minutes before his mind came loose from his body.

From beyond his imagined, floating seashell, he could sense a few minds out there. Fortunately, they were but dim, distant murmurs — like the droning of a far away beehive. From above his body, Harry watched with mixed emotions as Elizabeth carefully brushed his hair away from his pale face. In truth, he wasn't sure what to feel about her in return. He certainly wasn't inclined to freeze her out just because she'd moved overseas when he was small; she had her own life to lead, after all. And she did seem sincere in wanting to help him now. He continued to be extremely curious as to why she and Remus broke up. From what he'd been able to sense from the pair's emotions, they still cared about each other — a *lot* — and technically they were still married. Who knew? They might even get back together again if they could sort things out. Remus had the Wolfsbane Potion now — surely that had to improve things. Maybe that was even why Elizabeth invented it. And speaking of Remus ...

Harry watched as his werewolf guardian tiptoed into the CCU, a bottle of wine in one hand and a picnic basket in the other.

Go, Moony, he thought, chuckling to himself.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 20 – Blood Kisses

“It’s okay,” Remus said from across a rug on the grassy rooftop of Grimmauld Place, “I didn’t cook. Molly took pity on me.”

Elizabeth stifled a laugh and speared a meatball with her fork. Behind her husband stood a new conservatory filled with his orchids and other delicately perfumed flowers and ferns. Standing proudly beside that was a violently purple wishing well.

“Dedalus?” guessed Elizabeth, waving Molly’s meatball at it. Remus just grinned and uncorked the wine.

“So, what’s the story with this island?” he asked curiously after they’d demolished a rather tasty dinner and a bottle of red.

Elizabeth sighed under her breath at yet another safe subject. Ever since leaving the hospital, they’d talked about Harry, politics, mutual friends — everything except themselves. She knew she had no one to blame but herself; she’d asked for time to digest everything before they really talked. Flopping back onto her pillow, which sighed with pleasure at a job well done, she stared up into the starless sky. A slim silver crescent signalled the new moon was nigh. Two weeks, then, she thought, before he’ll try to make me leave. In the darkness, she felt his eyes upon her. It occurred to Elizabeth that you could do a lot in two weeks. She closed her eyes against the dull London sky and recalled the brilliant diamond-littered canopy that as children she and Sirius would stare into atop Finnegan’s Bluff, the waves crashing far below. What little remained of her guard disintegrated as sweet scents wafted from the conservatory, transporting her to another life, a shared-life, filled with laughter and passion.

“You can see a million stars from the island,” she said softly. “Everything’s so lush, so full of life ...” she whispered dreamily, stretching her arms behind her head, “... even the air — you can feel the ether all around you ... touch it, even ...”

Remus said nothing. Elizabeth rolled back to face him, curling cat-like around her grateful pillow. Remus continued watching her intently, his grey eyes glimmering in the candlelight. Evil lay in his lap, purring softly.

“He misses you terribly,” whispered Elizabeth.

“I miss him terribly, too,” Remus countered huskily.

Evil hissed sharply.

“Sorry, sorry!” fretted a female voice.

“Hestia?”

“Sorry,” she whispered apologetically to Remus. “I got your message to come over ...” Hestia’s voice trailed off as she looked between the pair on the grass and at the remnants of their dinner. “I can come back later ...”

Remus started to agree, but Elizabeth was already on her feet, cursing herself for being such an idiot. What was she thinking? He was clearly seeing this Jones woman.

“It’s getting late,” she said stiffly. “I might turn in.”

“I’ll show you your room,” Remus offered, sending fur flying as he scrambled to his feet. “It’s all made up.”

“No need,” insisted Elizabeth, backing away. She was very glad it was dark. “My tent’s fine. Goodnight, Hestia, Remus.”

Elizabeth couldn’t sleep. Her WizChat was trembling and glowing so brightly she didn’t need candles. She ignored it. A letter was folded in her palm, so creased and worn it was falling apart. It didn’t matter — she knew it by heart.

... and by the time you read this, I will be gone. Please don’t try to find me — I’m begging you.

A sudden burst of big-band music sounded from somewhere far above. It stopped immediately, but Mrs Black awoke, cursing and screaming. By the time Elizabeth had half-dragged on a silk robe and opened the door to the hallway, Remus had already silenced the portrait. As he turned, their eyes met. His gaze travelled downwards. Blushing, Elizabeth closed her robe over her blue negligee.

“Sorry,” he whispered, looking rather hot under the collar himself. “We’ll try to be more quiet.”

After his Occlumency lesson, Harry scored two whole hours of blissful oblivion inside his sea-snail before his mind awoke and came loose from his body. He floated over his hospital bed, surprised to find his guardian slumped in a chair beside him. Remus was dozing, his head lolling under the light of a few floating candles. There was no sign of — *Lizzie*. The name just popped into Harry’s head. Golden hair spilled through his fingers — Remus’s fingers. Blue silk slid off Elizabeth’s shoulders and he buried his lips in her neck. Harry panicked; he did *not* want to be seeing this! He felt a twitch in his finger and urgently tried to wake himself up, putting all his energy into that single digit, desperate to make it twitch again before Elizabeth’s hands could travel any further down his chest.

“S’up!” Harry complained, poking hard at Remus’s knee.

Remus jolted awake. He quickly hushed Harry and tried to get him to go back to sleep. Harry dragged his leaden body into a sitting position.

"Why are you here?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay," Remus said unconvincingly. "How was Lizzie?"

This was hardly a subject Harry could approach with composure. "Is everything okay with the Order?" he ventured instead.

Remus flinched. "It's nothing — nothing that can't wait till morning. You should go back to sleep."

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck tingled in warning. "Why d'you come here, then?"

"I — I just needed to get out of the house for a bit," said Remus. "Clear my head."

"About the Order?"

"Er — kind of. I was working with Hestia on the music box when Professor Dumbledore came by. He had a few things he wanted to discuss with me, that's all."

"It's about me, isn't it," Harry declared bluntly, to which Remus nodded reluctantly. "You may as well just tell me; I'm not going to get to sleep if I'm worried about it."

Defeated, Remus cast an Imperturbable Charm on the room.

"Harry, you have to understand that this is just an idea, no decision has been made, and if you don't want to do it, then it's dropped, right?"

Harry nodded and listened attentively to Dumbledore's proposal.

"He wants me to do *what*!?" he cried, flabbergasted.

Remus winced. "I know it sounds off, but you have to see it could gain considerable tactical advantages for the Order."

"Whose stupid idea was this anyway?"

"Er — Snape, I gather."

"Right!" Harry snapped, shaking his head in disbelief. "So, let me get this straight: Snape wants *me* to help him take credit for trying to kill me so *he* can get in good with Voldemort?"

"Solidifying Snape's connection to Voldemort's supporters will enable him to be a more effective information gatherer."

"A spy, you mean!"

Remus did not try to deny it. "Even though the supposed attack was unsuccessful, it could considerably improve his credibility with Voldemort's supporters — perhaps even with Lord Voldemort himself."

"Well, *yeah*!" Harry cried incredulously. "Exactly! I'd be helping him become a better Death Eater! You don't see a *problem* with that? How do you know he isn't *really* a traitor?"

"Snape is already privy to many sensitive matters — the Headmaster trusts him."

"Well, *I don't*!" Harry declared defiantly, enraged at even thinking of helping that twisted cockroach. *Snape!* All the work he'd done in calming his mind destroyed by that single word. The way he tormented Sirius, calling him a coward for simply doing what he was supposed to do, goading him at every opportunity. "I'M SICK OF THIS!" Harry roared, shaking off Remus's hands. "I DON'T WANT ANY PART OF IT!"

"Harry, calm down!" Remus ordered him sternly. "I'll tell Dumbledore — don't give it another thought."

Remus asked the impossible. Harry's guts writhed as if a snake fought to escape his belly.

"Snape stuffs up his stupid spell," he spat viciously, ignoring whatever Remus was saying, ignoring the ravens screeching in his ear, "I get ripped through the pipes! I get burned to death! AND NOW DUMBLEDORE WANTS TO USE ME! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH PAIN —"

Harry stopped dead — he couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Remus grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him, yelled something at him, but the sound of his voice — it was disappearing. Then Harry was no longer in his body. Time slowed to nothing. He watched in a daze as Remus drew his wand in slow motion and twisted towards the door. Before he could even cast his spell, Harry's heart started beating again. His soul was yanked back into his body and his lungs were fighting for air.

"Harry?" Remus's head whipped around. "Hold still, I'll get the Healer."

"No!" Harry blurted shakily. "I'm fine — fine, I just — just dizzy — I'm fine."

Remus did not believe him. After fetching Penelope, he hovered tensely over her shoulder, arms folded, as she examined Harry's Wheel of Anxiety.

"I should probably let Healer Dee explain in the morning, Professor Lupin," she said in a calm tone that didn't fool Harry one little bit.

"You know what it means," he said grimly. "Just tell him."

"Penelope, it's fine," Remus added calmly, though Harry knew he was feeling anything but. "We just want to know what we're dealing with here."

With evident reluctance, Penelope explained that Harry's salts weren't a tenth of what they should be.

"If they get any worse," she said, "then your grasp on reality could become unstable; you could become literally consumed with emotion."

"What," he said, trying to laugh, "so I'd become a proper nutcase?"

Penelope winced. "I wouldn't say that. And in any case, you already seem to be past that point. Oh, sorry," she said quickly at the look of indignation on Harry's face, "that didn't come out the way I meant. Harry, if your salts keep falling, there's a very real risk that your soul could be ripped from your body."

Penelope and Remus kept talking, but Harry wasn't listening. A chill of dread raced through him. Ripped from his body? That was what Voldemort said happened to *him* when the death curse rebounded, that he'd become less than a spirit, less than a ghost. That he'd drifted away, never sleeping, forcing himself onwards, endlessly searching, going to far away places, unable to do anything but possess creatures that made the fatal mistake of crossing his path.

"Harry?" Penelope said. She stroked his hair; Harry jumped as if burned.

"What? Sorry— sorry."

"I asked if you'd like a Draft of Peace," Penelope said gently. "And a dash of Euphoria wouldn't hurt."

"I think you should, Harry," Remus said very seriously.

Harry nodded uneasily. Ripped from his body? He *really* needed to get a grip on himself.

Penelope's potions took effect immediately, making him feel decidedly mellow and energised at the same time.

"Try to rest," she pleaded before leaving.

Remus sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over Harry and regarding him searchingly. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry I upset you before ..."

"What? Oh, that," Harry said dreamily, finding it hard to feel anything stronger than mild irritation right now. "What were you saying?"

"About Snape, I don't want you to worry about it. I'll tell the Headmaster you said no."

Harry gazed fondly at his guardian; he wasn't accustomed to adults agreeing with him.

"What'll happen?" he asked, though he was finding it increasingly difficult to care just at the moment.

"Nothing," said Remus simply. "I'll let Professor Dumbledore know you're against the plan with Snape, and that'll be the end of it."

"I just don't trust that dark bastard," Harry said dreamily. He'd been upset about something — what was it again?

"Harry, you don't need to explain — your concerns are perfectly understandable," said Remus. "I want you to try to sleep now."

"I have to go to sleep now," Harry advised Remus amiably. He gazed dreamily at the dancing candles and exhaled a happy sigh. "I'm perfectly understandable."

Remus's lips twitched. "Yes, you are," he agreed and started extinguishing candles.

Majestically, Harry waved his hands and all the candles lit up again. He tried to stand up on his bed to reach them, but Remus kept pulling him back down again. Didn't Remus understand? "I have to go dancing with the candles," Harry explained patiently.

"Harry — Harry, get back down. Harry, please, you need to lie down. No, no — down, yes, that's the way. How about I leave one candle, it's a very special candle ..."

"A special candle?" said Harry, squinting curiously amongst the dancers, trying to spot the special one. "But you need *two* candles to dance, silly."

"Two special candles then," Remus said as he tucked Harry tightly into bed, "but you can't see them properly if the others are in the way."

"No," Harry agreed wisely. "The others are always giggling. You can never get them on their own."

"Er, very true ..." Remus agreed sensibly, and swiftly extinguished all but the two special candles.

The special candles circled Harry's head in a graceful dance. Harry hummed along happily, growing drowsier and drowsier as the dancers dipped and swayed in time with Remus's wand.

"Sir?" sounded a woman's voice. "Master Harry? It's Jenkins, sir."

Harry blinked open bleary eyes to find a female Peacock Knight leaning over him. A second blue-robed figure stood at the end of the bed.

"Sorry to wake you, sir," she said politely, "but it's time for your fit."

Harry blinked groggily. "Wh—"

"It won't take a moment, sir."

It was five in the morning and the guards revealed orders from Remus Lupin to ensure his ward was full of painkilling potions before the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Harry tried to tell the guards he felt fine, but they had their orders, and soon Harry was lying on the floor, artfully entangled in his sheets. Fake vomit lay nearby and his legs were jerking from a Jelly Legs Jinx. Jenkins raised the alarm and a frightened Donna came rushing into the room. Harry clutched at his scar and feigned the appropriate pitiful moans and groans (a talent he'd picked up from playing the vanquished beast in endless DADA re-enactments for Professor Gilderoy Lockhart).

Back in his bed and feeling all the joy to be had from lovely potions, he cuddled his pillow and fell asleep in wonderful daze, dreaming of feeding paper-doll Chos into his Uncle Vernon's shredder. Even odder dreams followed, and he had just managed to extricate himself from Quirrell's turban and was bobbing over his bed when it hit. Harry watched with morbid curiosity as his unconscious body writhed and jerked in the darkened room.

Voldemort!

For once, Harry was deeply grateful his feeble body wouldn't wake up; there was *no way* he wanted to be down there right now. Blazing red eyes and coiling grey scales flashed past, as if glimpsed through the windows of a speeding train. Harry sensed the creature still out there somewhere, cautiously poking the mind of the body in the bed. But it was skittish; it didn't want to get too close. Within seconds it was gone and Harry felt himself being sucked along in its wake. To his immense surprise, he became a luminous golden spirit soaring through the clouds on the back of an eagle-owl, the mist fresh on his shimmering face, the wind whistling in his ears. Voldemort disappeared, but Harry could still hear his high, cruel laugh. He was with someone — *Wormtail!* !

"The boy is barely alive," Voldemort was gloating. "Surely, death cannot be far!"

Harry strained to hear more, but then they were flying again, for a longer time now, leaving London far behind. He tried to make out where they were going. Could he discover Voldemort's secret lair? His owl dipped below the cloud, drawn like a magnet to wherever Voldemort was going. Harry whizzed past trees, fields, villages — nothing looked familiar. Then they were rushing through a town. A giant yew came into view. Just visible through the tree was a building — no, a church ...

Abruptly, Harry fell off his owl and onto his hospital-room floor. A frightened Donna was shaking him; ravens shrieked madly; blue shapes rushed around his head, then turned lime-green. Drenched in sweat, his scar exploding though not as badly as it might have been without Donna's painkillers, Harry was nonetheless livid; if she hadn't woken him, he would've discovered Voldemort's hideout! Through blurred vision, he sought out the blue figures.

"REMUS!" he yelled.

"I'll get him," said one of the Knights at once.

The Healers hauled Harry's still-shaking body back into bed and tried to get him to drink their potions; Harry refused; he needed his wits about him. Remus arrived looking dishevelled in his dressing gown and slippers. At a look from Harry, he quietly but firmly cleared the room.

"I had a vision!" Harry panted breathlessly. "I flew — I chased him!"

"What do you mean you flew? Are you sure you weren't dreaming — they gave you some pretty strong stuff last night."

Harry fought to drag air into his lungs; he had to make Remus understand.

"Two years ago — I had this vision — I flew on an owl to where he was hiding; I saw him torture Pettigrew. I was just on the owl again. I followed him — I could hear him!"

"What did he say?" Remus said at once.

Harry shook his head impatiently. "Nothing — nothing. I mean he still — he still thinks I'm about to kick the bucket, but he was going to his hideout — I'm sure of it!"

"Where is it?" Remus said sharply, a dark, hungry look in his eye.

"I — I don't know," Harry admitted. Despair now competed with the pain addling his brains. "I — I thought I saw something — something I recognised, but ..."

"A cottage, a manor, a pub, a forest, the sea, that graveyard?" Remus suggested, his words tripping over themselves, confusing Harry all the more.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and pursed his lips, trying hard to remember the details of his vision, but it was already slipping away. He felt sure there was something, something on the tip of his tongue, but it was all swimming dizzily in and out of his head. He tried hard to stop shivering; his body was cold with sweat. Remus piled blankets over him.

"Where was he heading," he pressed the boy urgently, "a village, a forest?"

Harry shook his head. "Not a village — a town. A Muggle town — lots of shops — cars on the High Street. He went straight for the centre — I'm sure there was a church. Right in the middle. There was something funny about it."

Harry pounded his throbbing scar in frustration; he'd just described every town in England.

Remus stared, hungry for more, but Harry had nothing. Feeling thoroughly useless, he tried to convince Remus to read his mind and see the vision for himself. Although sorely tempted, Remus resisted, insisting Harry's body was too weak.

"My body's gonna be *dead* if we don't find him!" Harry declared defiantly.

Remus hesitated a moment longer, then drew his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

It was lucky Remus had an Imperturbable Charm on the CCU, for Harry loosed a blood-curdling scream as Voldemort's red-eyed creature ripped a hole straight through his forehead. Remus couldn't issue the countercharm fast enough. Harry's arched back collapsed. Clutching at his scar, he was astonished to not find blood and brains spilling everywhere.

"I'm okay — okay," he panted.

"We are not doing that again," Remus stated unequivocally. Shaken, he laid a hand on Harry's forehead and said, "You're burning up. Hold on."

He called the Healers back and waited, grim-faced, while they examined the patient and topped up his painkillers, which helped Harry's body feel better, but their Soothing Solution didn't stand a chance against his over-excited soul.

"How are you feeling?" Remus asked when he and Harry were alone again.

"Fine," Harry said fitfully. "Horrible. I'm just kicking myself I can't remember more of my vision."

"The important thing is you're okay."

"No, it's not! The important thing is finding Voldemort! Argh!" Harry grabbed at his hair in frustration. "I could kill Donna! I was *this* close to following him into his hideout!"

Remus rubbed his hands over his lips, thinking. "Do you think you could draw the town?"

Harry stared stupidly at the man; why didn't he think of that? After fetching Harry's drawing things, Remus left again to 'inform the Headmaster'. Whilst he was gone, Harry struggled to remember something — anything — useful. Remembering the vision hurt almost as much as Remus's Legilimency Charm, but Harry had no intention of sharing this minor detail with his guardian. Fortunately, once he fixed upon an image, the actual drawing part wasn't so bad. He sketched a pair of overhead views of the High Street he spotted — the church eluded him.

"They're not very good," he apologised when Remus returned. They just showed the tops of cars and a row of anonymous-looking market umbrellas — but Remus was intrigued and examined them closely. "Do you recognise anything?" Harry asked him.

"Something about it does look familiar," admitted Remus. "Hang on," he said warily at the look of victory on Harry's face, "it's been a good fifteen years. It could be any one of a hundred towns."

Harry beamed at him anyway, gratified to provide a concrete clue for once. "But you think it could be useful?"

"Could be," Remus agreed, squinting at the market umbrellas. "I'll do some recon; see if I can find it again."

Harry's smile vanished.

"You're not *going* there?" he blurted before he could stop himself. "If Voldemort's in that town —"

"Harry, calm down," Remus ordered him. "It's only reconnaissance. I'll do a flyover — it'll be fine."

"Your broom's rubbish!" fretted Harry. How could he have thought finding Voldemort was a good idea? "At least take my Invisibility Cloak," he insisted. "And my Firebolt."

Remus's lips twitched. "My broomstick is not rubbish, thank you very much, but I must admit burning around the countryside on a Firebolt does sound like fun."

Suddenly feeling foolish, Harry realised the man must do this kind of thing for the Order all the time. And he was a Defence expert. Still, Harry didn't fancy losing another guardian. Then the solution hit him.

"Take Elizabeth with you!" he demanded, amazed by his own brilliance. "She's an Auror!"

"She is," agreed Remus, "but I'm sure she'd prefer to spend her time here with you rather than hooning around the countryside with me." Harry

hid a smile; he somehow doubted that. "Anyway," Remus continued carefully, "I'd have to tell her about your visions — in case we ran into trouble — and I thought you wanted that kept just between us and Professor Dumbledore for now."

"Oh ... right," said Harry. He wasn't used to adults paying attention to what he said. "But you trust her, don't you?"

"With my life," Remus agreed without the slightest hesitation.

Harry decided Elizabeth would be okay; she had nothing to do with that rotten Summoning Charm, after all. Remus gave a slight nod, but Harry could tell he was deeply relieved.

"Will they let me go home today?" asked Harry.

"I don't think that's too likely, son," Remus replied sympathetically. "Not if Voldemort keeps setting you back."

"What — you mean if he comes back here again?"

Remus looked confused. "Back?"

Harry stared blankly at his guardian. "Didn't I say that? Voldemort was here — in my room, he —"

"What?"

Harry fought back a rather unmanly giggle. "What exactly are you planning on doing with that?" Remus went a little pink and stuffed his wand back into his dressing gown. "He wasn't *here* here," Harry assured him, "I just sensed his mind."

"Sounds pretty '*here*' to me!" Remus complained. "You might have said something earlier."

Harry shrugged apologetically. "I've felt him before — at school and stuff. It's not new."

Remus remained rattled. "Did he try to possess you?"

Harry gave the question some thought. "I don't think so. Not after what happened in the Ministry. I think he was just trying to see if I was alive. He was only here a few seconds — it's like he didn't want to get too close."

"But you're okay?" checked Remus.

"Yeah, I'm fine now. Those purple painkillers are wicked."

Remus ignored that last bit. "Harry, what happened in the Ministry? With you and Voldemort?"

Harry chewed at his lip. "What do you know about possession?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. No one does; possession is a very rare gift — something a person is born with, like being a Metamorphmagus or an Animagus. You can find diaries of astral travellers dating back centuries."

"So, when I'm out of my body," Harry checked, wanting to be clear, "like having a vision, I'm doing this astral travel thing."

"Well, I expect so," said Remus, tilting his head a little, "unless I mistook you and you actually *have* been off gallivanting around the countryside on the back of a giant owl?"

An uncomfortable chill swept over Harry. He always thought his visions were something he picked up by accident, kind of like radio static. But Voldemort had nothing to do with the way he'd been moving around the hospital, visiting people like Frank Longbottom, messing about with Cho, getting tangled up with Crouch and Kreacher and Lockhart. The Healers said that hearing things was normal for patients in his condition, but possession sounded really rare.

"But it's Dark Magic, isn't it?" Harry said slowly. "So if you're born with it ..."

"Harry, being born with abilities in the astral plane doesn't make a person evil, any more than being born a Parselmouth does. It's what you *do* with your abilities that matters."

Harry was afraid of that. Could Voldemort have transferred more than Parseltongue when he cursed him?

"I don't think you need a lot of visitors today," Remus suggested and wisely took Harry's dismissive shrug for the emphatic agreement it was. "I'll let Donna know."

Remus and Elizabeth stopped by before leaving on their mission together. Harry didn't want to sound like an old woman, but he was deeply conflicted about them going off on a mission based solely on information he'd gleaned from a Voldemort-related vision. It didn't feel like a trap — just a ordinary vision, but still ...

Elizabeth managed to ease his mind by describing at length exactly what kinds of stealth and concealment charms they were going to be using. For the mission, Remus was taking Harry's Firebolt and Elizabeth was using Remus's broomstick because hers was damaged. Remus actually

wanted to do it the other way around, but Elizabeth said she'd prefer something simpler she knew she could control.

"What happened to your old broom?" Harry asked curiously, deeply impressed that she'd flown all the way across the Atlantic Ocean on it.

Elizabeth went a little pink. "A goat ate it."

Remus and Harry burst out laughing.

"It's not funny," she said stiffly.

"It really is," Remus assured her.

"So, was this a *flying* goat?" Harry asked with an innocent air.

Remus turned to Harry. "Doesn't a Chimaera have the body of a goat?"

"It was just a goat," moaned Elizabeth.

"And the tail of a dragon ..." Harry said, nodding wisely. "Dragons can be tricky."

"Oh — and the head of a lion — mustn't forget that," said Remus. "I don't think they fly, though, do they?"

Elizabeth groaned. "An ordinary, run of the mill, goat."

"I bet Hagrid would know," Harry offered. "He's probably breeding them for class next year. They better not get loose in the broom shed, though, Madam Hooch would not be at all pleased."

"Indeed not," agreed Remus. "Lizzie, you're not trying to smuggle banned Chimaera eggs into the country for Hagrid, now, are you?"

Remus and Harry exchanged a grin when Elizabeth at last cracked a smile.

"You can both just shut up right now, thank you very much. Come on, you wretch, time to fly."

"I'm not sure how long we'll be, Harry," said Remus, "but the guards know how to reach us in need. We can be back within minutes. You need to rest, remember. I'm serious. Peace and quiet. You'll be okay?"

"I'll be *fine*, Moony!" moaned Harry. He was more worried about them than himself.

Elizabeth gave Harry a swift kiss on the cheek.

"Don't forget to practice your shielding," she reminded him as Remus tugged her out the door.

"Bye!" Harry called after them. "Fly safe!"

As the door swung shut, Harry self-consciously touched his fingers to where Elizabeth had kissed him. She'd just done it — just like that — as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Harry got his first proper look at the Peacock Knights when he was allowed to walk on watery legs down the corridor to the bathroom. He quickly discovered the Knights were worse than Mad-Eye Moody. And there seemed to be more of them now. Communicating by hand signals, eyes everywhere, as if in combat, they insisted on casting a Disillusionment Charm on him even to just visit the loo, which certainly made finding the toilet bowl interesting. On his return, Healers Dee and Abercrombie gave him a thorough post-Transmutation examination. Although concerned about his fits, they seemed generally pleased with his progress. Oddly enough, no one made any further mention of Psycho-Healers.

Cho was working as a volunteer again and brought Harry his morning tea. Harry suspected she'd been hearing about his fits from that useless Donna. She was nervous and tired and conceded she hadn't slept well. He was quite relieved when, after inspecting his Wheel of Anxiety, Healer Dee pointedly suggested that Healer Smethwyck could use a hand down in Bites and Stings. Cho left him a copy of the *Daily Prophet* to squint through, and he was surprised to find there was nothing in it about his condition, nothing at all. He supposed that was why Voldemort came to the hospital. The only mention was in the Sporting Section with the Holyhead Harpies pledging to donate any winnings from their next game to Saint Mungo's Hospital as a sign of respect for that 'brave young Harry Potter'.

The rest of his morning passed tensely, his lack of visitors giving him plenty of time to worry about the Lupins. Fortunately, Donna managed to forget to pass on the message to Penelope about 'no visitors', and after lunch Harry received a welcome distraction in the form of Ron, Hermione, Hannah, Susan, Padma, and Parvati. And with them was another very welcome visitor.

"Good afternoon, dear boy," Frank hissed regally as Susan carried him into the CCU on a silver-tasselled, red-velvet pillow.

Whilst Ron Doodled in a corner and Hermione stood glued to Harry's wall charts, the rest of the girls perched around the edges of his bed, chatting cheerily about nothing. Harry found himself deeply content to lay propped up in bed, smiling and nodding in the right places, relishing the girls' uncomplicated feelings of affection and relief. He didn't even mind Susan fussing over his fingers, showing admirable patience while she and Frank carefully inspected them for any lasting damage.

"The things boys will do to get out of music practice," Susan observed dryly as she turned Harry's hands this way and that. "You know, you'll never get on top of *Charlotte the Harlot* at this rate."

Harry snorted a laugh.

Frank looked curiously around the room. "Do you hear a dove?"

"I do indeed," Harry replied in Parseltongue. "It means I'm getting happy for real."

"Well, of course it does!" Frank said, jerking his head meaningfully towards Susan. "What have I been telling you?"

Ever since the girls arrived, Harry's salts had been steadily improving, and whenever Hermione flitted past, she beamed at him with pride, but when Cho came by with afternoon tea and biscuits, she was deeply unimpressed to find Harry's room full of competition. She was even less impressed to see Frank, who by now was coiled possessively around his boy's neck. Cho immediately nudged Parvati aside to make room for Harry's tray and pulled up a stool up to sit closest to him; she was playing second-fiddle to no one.

"Who brought that in?" she said, sparing a look of distaste for the python that was returned with interest.

"Me," Susan said. "I hope that's okay. The Healers said —"

"That was an exception," Cho declared forbiddingly. "They don't ordinarily allow pets."

Cho looked like she had a lot more to say on the subject, but the long awaited Optic-Healer had arrived. He swept grandly into the room, at least a dozen silver instruments and eyeglasses swinging from his neck, which Harry thought made him look very much like a walking, lime-green grandfather clock. Healer Google's smile disappeared when he spotted Frank, who was dead set against letting 'that great green quack' anywhere near 'his Harry'.

"Do you want me to stun him?" Cho asked the Healer hopefully.

Frank bared his jaws at Cho, as did Susan.

"He's not hurting anybody," she declared stubbornly, though this was not entirely true, for the python had decided he needed to protect Harry's eyes.

"Frank — Frank! — you're really not helping," Harry said with exasperation, trying to pry the python off his head.

With Susan's help, Harry finally convinced Frank to let go of him, but the snake continued hissing and lunging menacingly at both Cho and Healer Google (who was staying as far away from the bed as dignity would allow). Harry tried to bribe Frank by offering to share his dinner, but apparently Frank had a very low opinion of hospital food. Harry finally calmed him down by asking him to sing a song.

"He can sing?" asked Susan, intrigued.

Harry nodded; Cho just rolled her eyes.

"Any song?" checked Frank, coming over all coy and tickling the edges of his mouth with his tail.

"Anything you like," promised Harry.

Frank immediately slithered over to Susan, coiled around her arm, and gave a rousing rendition of *I'm just wild about Harry!*

"I think I hear a tune," said Susan happily. She frowned in concentration and held Frank closer to listen.

Harry smiled through gritted teeth and promised himself that his serpent would pay for that. When Frank was finished, Harry turned silver, puppy-dog eyes on the girls and begged them to sing their school song. They cheerfully obliged, singing Hoggy-Warty Hogwarts to the tune of *We're All Going on a Summer Holiday*. Frank delivered to Harry a look of the very deepest disgust.

"Oh, that was *low...*" he hissed, ducking for cover.

Harry just smiled sweetly and kept fishing his snake out from under the blankets, the better for him to hear.

Whilst Healer Google examined Harry's eyes, Cho and the other girls debated the merits of the sample frames spread across the bed. Harry couldn't have been less interested and asked the Healer to modify his existing spectacles to suit his slight change in prescription. Cho tried hard to convince him to accept a set of contact lenses, reasoning he could use them for Quidditch, but Harry knew she just wanted to turn him into her spectacle-free dream-Harry.

"I don't need them," he said flatly.

Cho took a moment to beat up his pillows.

"Roger Davies wears them," she observed. "You remember Roger, don't you, Harry?" she said sweetly, punching a pillow. "Ravenclaw captain."

"Oh, Roger is *absolutely* dreamy!" Padma volunteered helpfully.

"Totally dreamy," Cho agreed wickedly.

"Fine," he said shortly, and he accepted a pair, but he had no intention of wearing them.

Frank, as usual, was on any side Cho wasn't, and broke into a lusty chorus of *You're So Vain*.

"Branching out a bit aren't we, Frank?" Harry sniggered in Parseltongue. "What happened to Sinatra?"

Frank stopped singing long enough to sniff, "The Voice is too noble to adequately represent my sentiments."

It wasn't long before Cho pulled rank and ordered the python home. Frank was far from pleased, and it took both Susan and Hannah to pacify him. Harry took revenge on Cho by giving each Hufflepuff girl a lengthy hug goodbye, thoroughly relishing the feelings of jealousy it provoked in Cho — not to mention the lovely sensation of hugging girls who hugged him back so affectionately.

The doves were still cooing from Susan's farewell when the rest of the DA turned up with Get Well cards and sweets. When Lavender arrived there were tears Harry could have done without — and that only stopped when he relented and let her give him a quick haircut. The Ravenclaw boys persisted in pushing for details about the accident. Ron and Hermione were quick to shoot down their inquiries, but Harry decided it'd be better to just give them a few grisly facts to shut them up. To a deathly silent room, he revealed he'd been summoned through the boiler by a broken security charm and that all his skin had burned off, inspiring the room to wince as one and successfully quelling any more questions. On learning he'd been taking a bath at the time, Padma, Lavender, and Parvati turned into hosepipes from worrying they'd broken it somehow during the Jacuzzi Party.

"What Jacuzzi Party?" Ron complained from the floor. Bruce buzzed indignantly on his shoulder.

Natalie Ramsay inadvertently came to Harry's rescue once again, this time providing a welcome distraction for his friends when they discovered that *the* Natalie was on the other end of the WizChat. Zacharias, Anthony, Michael, and Terry ignored Ron's (and Bruce's) very dirty looks and crowded around him on the floor, each of them keen to send their two Knuts worth to the pretty Canadian from the newspaper.

Hermione, closely monitoring Harry's Wheel of Anxiety, kept rushing off after the Healers to ask questions. Harry wished she'd bring one back with her; he didn't want to say anything, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the swelling crowd.

"Are you okay?" asked Ginny very quietly.

Harry tried to make out he was fine, but he really wasn't. Forget Cruciatus — an hour with all of his friends' emotions madly bouncing around was enough to drive *anyone* nuts. He was privately very grateful when Ginny turned on the room, clapped her hands, and bossily ordered them all home. Unfortunately, Neville left with them before Harry had a chance for a private word about his parents.

Alone at last with Ron and Hermione, Harry filled them in on his latest vision and the drawings he'd made for Remus. He also told them of Dumbledore's ludicrous proposal to let Snape take credit for trying to kill him.

"He's barking!" cried Ron, disbelief etched on his freckled face. Harry and Ron looked at Hermione, expecting her to agree, but she was staring thoughtfully into space.

"No way!" declared Ron. "You think Dumbledore's right to sell Harry out!"

Hermione's eyes flashed dangerously.

"I think no such thing, thank you very much," she said icily. "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't dream of approving this kind of plan if he thought Professor Snape was truly a traitor. He trusts him. I may not be very fond of Professor Snape right now —" Ron snorted derisively. Hermione continued as if she didn't hear him, "Can't you see how valuable it would be in improving his access to important Death Eater information?"

"And to sell out the Order," snarled Ron.

As Harry listened to his best friends vigorously debating the pros and cons of Snape's proposal, he felt his anger about it dissipating, leaving him feeling strangely cool and calm.

"What if we said yes," said Harry abruptly. The other two stopped mid-sentence and stared at him. "Seriously," said Harry, "what if I said Snape could take credit for attacking me?"

Although startled, Ron and Hermione were nonetheless up to the task of turning their minds to how Harry might implicate Snape.

"Did they say how they want you to do it?" asked Ron.

"Ah ... that's the tricky bit," admitted Harry. "I can't just come right out and say Snape tried to kill me — he'd get lynched. They just want it to be an unsubstantiated rumour."

"Easy," said Ron, "just use Rita Skeeter."

"Harry can't do that!" said Hermione, scandalised. "Professor Snape's reputation would be ruined!"

Ron and Harry delivered identical looks to her that said, 'Yeah, and ...'

Hermione rolled her eyes at them. "Don't you see? He's no use to the Order if he gets sacked or arrested or worse. It has to be just a slip of the

tongue to the right — well, *wrong* — people. Enough to confirm his fake story, but not enough to really do any harm to his reputation.”

“At school then,” mused Harry. “We could let the Slytherins overhear us in the corridor or something. You can bet it’d go straight to their Death Eater parents.”

With Hermione nodding approvingly, the trio started plotting ways they could get a rumour started. Ron had a particularly inspired notion involving Harry having a heart attack at the Welcome Feast and screaming at the top of his lungs, ‘*It was the great bat who done me in!*’, before collapsing face-first into a punch bowl.

“Subtle,” laughed Harry.

Ron and Hermione hung around until Remus and Elizabeth returned. As soon as Harry saw them, a weight lifted off him that he wasn’t even aware he’d been carrying until it was gone. They both looked tired and windswept, but they were safe! And they’d brought —

“Pizza ...” Ron breathed blissfully, his blue eyes misting over as delicious smells filled the CCU.

Harry abandoned his hospital dinner and attacked the pizzas with almost as much gusto as Ron.

“So, d’you find anything?” Harry asked Remus as he reached for a fat slice of mushroom and pepperoni.

Remus stared at him blankly, then his eyes flicked meaningfully towards the others.

“Oh, I already told them everything,” Harry admitted apologetically.

“Why does that not surprise me?” said Remus ruefully. “No, we didn’t find anything, but we’ll keep trying. A couple of places looked promising, but none entirely matched your vision.” A small sigh escaped his lips as he opened the pizza box near Ron and found it empty.

“Oh, okay,” said Harry, in equal parts relieved and disappointed they hadn’t discovered a nest of Death Eaters. “Um, you know dat fing — ah — hot ...” he waved the heat from his mouth and swallowed the food down, “that thing with Snape? Well, I’ve thought about it some more and it might be okay.”

“What *thing* with Snape?” said Elizabeth tensely. Harry looked at his godmother curiously. She hated the man. Absolutely and positively loathed him.

“I think we need more pizza,” said Remus firmly. “Why don’t I explain everything while we’re waiting, Lizzie?”

“I wonder what that was all about,” Hermione mused thoughtfully after the Lupins left.

“Dunno,” said Harry. “She can’t stand him, though.”

“Who?” said Ron. “Lupin? Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s upset with him. I mean, after everything that happened between them.”

“No — not Remus,” said Harry. “She likes Remus. I meant Snape. Hang on a minute, after *what* happened between them?”

“Oh, nothing,” Ron said airily, idly watching Bruce creep in and out of his fingers, “just going on what Natalie told me ...”

Hermione and Harry were all ears.

“Are you gonna eat that?” asked Ron, pointing to Harry’s pudding.

Harry shoved the whole dinner tray towards him. Ron started spilling the dirt on the Lupins’ story, but he kept getting bits mixed up.

“Hang on,” he said, “I’ll find it in the Doodle.” He grabbed the WizChat and scrolled up and down the Doodle page until he got to the right spot. “Here you go,” he said at last.

Hermione and Harry squeezed together on the bed, the journal across their knees, so they could read it together.

“Who’s ‘Big Red’?” Hermione said with a laugh.

“It’s just a nickname,” muttered Ron, blushing beetroot.

Big Red: How come they broke up?

Blonde Beater: I’d really have to start from the beginning.

Big Red: Sure.

Blonde Beater: And I only know what my Aunt Lizzie told me.

Big Red: Cool.

Blonde Beater: Well, they met at school. I’m not sure when they started going out, but they were maybe like 20 or so when they first tried to get engaged.

Big Red: Tried?

Blonde Beater: My grandparents weren't real keen.

Big Red: How come? Because he's — Sorry, forget that. Go on.

Blonde Beater: So you know he has certain monthly — issues?

Big Red: Starts howling at the Moon.

Blonde Beater: Goes a bit crazy.

Big Red: Yeah.

Blonde Beater: Yeah. Anyway, no. Not exactly. My grandparents weren't too thrilled about that, but they were more worried he was only after her money.

Big Red: Her money?

Blonde Beater: I know! They were such idiots. What does money matter?! Apparently they didn't think too much of his prospects. Uncle Remus had a lot of trouble holding down a job. As soon as a new boss found out about his problem, he'd get the sack. Grandfather offered him a job, but Uncle Remus refused. Said he didn't want his charity.

Big Red: Too right!

Blonde Beater: Anyway, they planned to get married once Auntie Lizzie finished her Auror training, but Uncle Remus still didn't have a job. Aunt Lizzie didn't want to let that stop them and insisted on at least getting engaged. So that's when Uncle Remus asked my grandparents for her hand in marriage, but they said no.

Big Red: Whoa. No offence, but that is seriously out of order.

Blonde Beater: I know! Aunt Lizzie was furious with them and wanted to get married anyway, but Uncle Remus refused to get married without her parents' blessing. He said he didn't want her estranged from her family. He wouldn't even consider trying to get engaged again until he got a proper job. Aunt Lizzie kept saying it didn't matter and he kept saying well it mattered to him and they had this huge row over it. It nearly broke them up for good.

Big Red: But they did get married.

Blonde Beater: Yeah, but that was a lot later.

Big Red: Sorry — go on.

Blonde Beater: Okay, so it's a week later and they're still not talking to each other and then there's this big Death Eater attack. You know about Death Eaters?

Big Red: I've fought against them.

Blonde Beater: Yeah, right.

Big Red: I have!

Blonde Beater: Whatever you say.

Big Red: You know that night in June when You-Know-Who attacked the Ministry of Magic and there were schoolkids there — and one of them was Harry Potter — well me and my sister and my friends were there, too. I landed in the hospital wing and everything.

Blonde Beater: Oops, sorry. I thought you were being, you know. My apologies. So what happened in the Ministry?

“Hang on,” complained Harry as Hermione scrolled downwards.

“Read it later,” she muttered. “We need to get through this before the pizza's cooked.”

She was scrolling for a very long time. Harry didn't know how she could read that fast; even with his glasses, it was just a blur to him.

“Got it,” she said finally.

Blonde Beater: So anyway, they're still not talking to each other — but before they even had a chance to make up, there was this Death Eater attack that my aunt was caught up in. It was really, really terrible; she was tortured half to death. Uncle Remus was the one who found her and got her to hospital. She was completely out of it for the first six months. Even worse, it happened only a couple of weeks before You-Know-Who was defeated.

Big Red: That's terrible!

Blonde Beater: Yeah, it is. Anyway, Uncle Remus visited her every day, even though the Healers said there was no hope of her ever getting better. She proved them wrong, though.

Big Red: So then they got married?

Blonde Beater: Not quite. She was still really weak and it took another six months in and out of hospital for her to really get back on her feet. Uncle Remus was there for her every step of the way. So anyway, by now it's a year after the war and Uncle Remus finally managed to get a job, something with flowers, I think. So he went back to my grandparents and asked for her hand in marriage again. Aunt Lizzie told them she would never have survived without Uncle Remus, and this time they said yes. They finally understood how much they loved each other. They got married three months later, at Christmastime in Venice. It was so romantic. It snowed and everything.

Blonde Beater: Ron?

Blonde Beater: You there?

Big Red: Yeah — I just had to get something out of my eye.

Blonde Beater: Aw.

Big Red: What? It's really dusty in here.

Blonde Beater: In a hospital.

Big Red: Shut up.

Blonde Beater: Shutting up, you old softie.

Big Red: So why'd they break up after all that?

Blonde Beater: Well, they were married for about three-and-a-half years then one day he just left. He left a note saying God knows what and just left. Just like that.

Big Red: Just like that!?!?

Blonde Beater: Just like that. Dad's still filthy about it.

Big Red: What did your aunt do?

Blonde Beater: What do you think she did? She's an Auror! She hunted him down and made him explain himself!

Big Red: And!

Blonde Beater: Ah, well, all I know is she found him in the Black Forest. And that's where the well runs dry, I'm afraid.

Big Red: NO! She must have told you more than that!

Blonde Beater: Don't think I haven't tried. She always says it's between her and her husband and then she tries to distract me by going shopping. You wouldn't believe how many pairs of shoes I've scored thanks to Uncle Remus. I don't actually remember much of the wedding (I was only 3), but I've got this really clear memory of everyone being really busy and racing around and I'm just sitting there on the church steps, bawling my eyes out because Grandmother got rid of the snow because she didn't want to ruin her shoes. And my mother is cross because I'm getting my dress all dirty and Uncle Remus comes over, calm as can be, and sits on the steps with me (and this is probably like two minutes before he's supposed to be inside getting married!) and he pulls me up onto his lap and dries my tears and he makes it snow, just for me. So we're sitting there inside this fluffy white snowstorm, just the two of us, and the snow is covering us and getting in our hair and on our eyelashes and I'm just sooo happy.

Big Red: Aw!

Blonde Beater: I know! But then it went all pear-shaped, of course. And I'm like 6 years old, and he's my favourite uncle one day and just gone the next. No goodbye or anything. Just gone. And I never saw him again. I think that's what hurt the most. That he never even said goodbye.

Harry sneaked a look at Hermione. A fat tear was trembling on the end of her lashes.

"People shouldn't do that," she snuffled heavily.

"No," Harry agreed soberly.

He reached his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. This, apparently, was entirely the wrong thing to do, for Hermione immediately dissolved into tears, clinging to Harry and sobbing her heart out over his shoulder. Harry awkwardly patted her on the back and looked helplessly at Ron, who just nodded knowingly.

"She get to the bit where the parents finally said yes?"

"Nah," whispered Harry through Hermione's wild hair, "the bit where Remus never said goodbye to Natalie."

Nodding wisely, Ron crept over and stole back the WizChat.

"You don't want to read about what happened to her Puffskein then," he advised.

"Remus never — hic — never said goodbye — hic — to — to — me either," Hermione hiccupped in a quivering voice. "After everything — hic — in the Shrieking Shack — he just left — hic — not a word. And Sirius — I never — hic — got to say — hic —"

Harry didn't know what to say. It never really occurred to him that Hermione felt so very deeply about his dad's old friends. It was nice, in a way, to know how much she cared. Ron found a box of tissues and he and Harry took turns offering them to their best girl as she blubbered, largely incoherently, about many, many things, but most of all, about Harry's accident. Hermione went full throttle for a good fifteen minutes (and half the tissue box), but when the pizza arrived, she found the strength to eat four large slices.

"Stop looking at me like that."

Evil flicked his tufted tail high in the air and continued prowling disdainfully between Elizabeth's simmering cauldrons. When she and Remus returned to Grimmauld Place from the hospital, Elizabeth had headed straight for the potions lab, ostensibly to brew some more of the Strengthening Solution Penelope had prescribed for her, but really, to avoid another scene like the one they'd had in the pizza restaurant. She and Remus did not agree *at all* about the trust the Order could place in Severus Snape. And yet she knew that she, too, had failed Harry miserably. It was all such a horrible mess and there was plenty of blame to go around.

A knock sounded at the open lab door.

"Lizzie?" prompted Remus. "Ah, listen, are you done here, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Elizabeth nodded stiffly. She ladled herself a beaker of turquoise Strengthening Solution and followed Remus into the dining room. While he was carefully relocking the doors, Elizabeth looked around in amazement. The faded dining room of her youth had been turned into some kind of war room. High-level stealth and concealment incantations littered the walls — Elizabeth recognised Alastor Moody's handwriting. There were blueprints, maps, and pin-boards showing the whereabouts of both friendly and opposition forces.

"I shouldn't be seeing any of this, Remus," said Elizabeth tightly. "I'm not a member any more. I can't be expected to —"

"No one's asking you to go into battle again, Lizzie," Remus cut in, "but Professor Dumbledore is keen to involve as many overseas wizards as possible."

Elizabeth stared fixedly at the walls. She was not about to throw her life away again by rejoining Dumbledore's crusade. Rejoining an Order that followed their leader so blindly that they'd been content to let Sirius rot in Azkaban for thirteen long years; an Order that chose to conceal crucial information from Harry resulting in him falling victim to Voldemort's traps.

"You needn't live in Britain to be valuable to the Order," Remus ventured uneasily. "Will you at least think about it?"

Dumbledore always did know how to hit under the belt, thought Elizabeth bitterly. He knew she'd never say no to Remus.

Not looking at him, she said, "You know I'll always be an ally to the Order. I don't know about anything more, but, yes, I will think about it."

"Thank you," Remus said hoarsely.

Prowling the long room, her eye was caught by a deeply unhappy charcoal portrait of Harry. Her chest tightened the longer she stared into his tormented face. How the boy had ever become the gracious soul she'd met in the hospital Elizabeth would never know. For all her anti-magic mania, Petunia Dursley must have been doing something right. Elizabeth sipped from her potion beaker, savouring the enervating tingle coursing through her body. It suddenly occurred to her that Petunia might not even know her nephew had been injured.

"Does Petunia know about the accident?" she asked Remus.

"No idea," said Remus shortly.

Elizabeth tensed at the sudden, ugly look on Remus's face. It was a look that took her back some fifteen years.

"Remus," she started reasonably, "surely Petunia deserves to know what's going on."

"What she *deserves*," Remus growled, the wolf surfacing again, "is to —"

Remus never finished the sentence; the glass beaker in Elizabeth's hand had just exploded spectacularly.

"*Merlin, Lizzie, I'm sorry! Don't move!*"

He vanished the shards of glass embedded in her arm, and conjured thick dressings to stem the blood spurting from her wrist.

"It's — it's —" she hiccupped, "— it's okay."

"It's anything *but* okay," said Remus tensely, trying to hold pressure against her wounds. "D'you think you can Apparate with me?"

Elizabeth nodded dizzily and he gathered her tightly in his arms. Nothing happened. He swore furiously and issued a complex counter-spell to lift the Disapparition Jinx. A moment later, they were inside the empty day clinic at Saint Mungo's. The last thing Elizabeth saw was a curly haired, lime-green apple.

"Easy ... just lie there for a bit," said a female voice.

Elizabeth's eyelids flickered open. Above her stood Remus, deathly pale, his face splattered with blood. And his robes — Remus was covered in blood. The smell, it was overwhelming.

"What ..." she murmured dazedly, "... Penelope?"

The Trainee Healer nodded to Remus, and together they helped Elizabeth to sit up.

"I just need you to drink some of this for me," Penelope said calmly, holding a glass of thick red fluid to her lips. "That's the way. Blood-Replenishing Potion. You lost quite a bit." She had Elizabeth drink down three more glasses. "Your colour's looking much better," she said approvingly. "How do you feel?"

Elizabeth looked down at her robes, sodden with blood and turquoise potion. "Wet," she said ruefully.

Penelope had already healed her wounds and released her to go home.

"But take it easy, okay?" she urged her. "Harry needs you in one piece."

Elizabeth tried to smile; Remus still looked distraught.

"Remy, I'm fine, truly," she said, letting him help her to her feet. "Just blood loss — I'm all filled up again. Take me home so we can get cleaned up, okay?"

Remus folded her in his arms. When they landed in the potions lab, he didn't let go. He just stood there, his breath uneven, holding her tightly. Elizabeth let him.

"I'm okay, darling," she whispered, "I'm okay."

The ground disappeared as he pulled her up into him and buried his face in her neck. Elizabeth grabbed fistfuls of his hair and yanked him to her. His lips crushed hers and Elizabeth was finally home, locked in a feverish embrace with the man she adored. She didn't want to think — only to feel, touch, taste ...

Elizabeth gasped. *Blood — her blood!* Werewolves heightened sense of smell! She broke away, tripping over Evil, who hissed angrily in complaint.

Blinking, Remus staggered back, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry — I didn't — I'm sorry ..."

Elizabeth fell against the limp wall of her tent, suddenly dizzy. *No — use your brain, Lizzie!* She knew full-well that he was capable of controlling his reactions to human pheromones in non-lunar times. But he was with Hestia now, wasn't he?

"Lizzie, I'm so sorry, I ..."

The look of mortification on Remus's face turned Elizabeth's insides to molten lead. What *was* this then? Just a bit of spur of the moment lust?

"Go ..." she said faintly, "please. Just go."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 21 – The Fury

With pepperoni and cheese still scenting the CCU, and feeling doubly-heartened by his steadily cooing Wheel of Anxiety, Harry sweet-talked Penelope into letting him out for a proper walk after dinner. Freshly Disillusioned, he shuffled in his dressing gown and slippers down the corridors on her arm, two Peacock Knights hovering close behind. Visiting hours now over, the hospital was winding down for the evening and Harry headed straight for the Closed Ward. With one thing and another, he hadn't spoken with Frank Longbottom since his day in the bath, and he wanted to see for himself that the nice old bloke was okay.

"You want to go in there?" Penelope said dubiously, staring uncertainly in the general direction of Harry's hospital-coloured head. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Harry said determinedly. "I want to visit some friends of my mum and dad."

Although Penelope was willing, the Peacock Knights were disinclined to expose their charge to a ward-full of Saint Mungo's most insane inmates.

"Bit late for that," Harry muttered under his breath. "Look," he said to them, "I just want to say hello; they're like family. I don't have a lot of family," he added shamelessly.

The Knights decided to allow it, but only after camouflaging themselves as lime-robed Healers and executing a brisk security check.

Excited now, Harry hurried down the ward as quickly as his tender toes would allow, past Gilderoy Lockhart, who was gazing adoringly in his mirror, past fur-faced Agnes, licking her paws clean from dinner, past elephant-nosed Gregory and triple-eyed Theophrastus, finally stopping at the bedside of grey-haired Frank Longbottom, who was busy tearing his newspaper into long strips. He had a huge pile of them now at the end of his bed. Harry grinned at how much Frank looked like Neville in Herbology, the way his forehead was all screwed up in concentration, the way the tip of his tongue poked from the side of his mouth. Thoroughly chuffed to have gotten this far, Harry rocked on his heels, waiting for Frank to look up, but he didn't. Belatedly, Harry realised he needed to stop being Disillusioned. The guards drew the curtains and removed the charm. Harry's grin stiffened slightly; Frank still wasn't looking at him. He moved around the bed to get closer.

"Frank?" he said hopefully. "Mr Longbottom? It's Harry, sir, Harry Potter. James's boy."

Frank's hands shook, ripping his strip in two. His eyes roamed the walls, looking for something, finally stopping on the ceiling. Harry looked up, too, saw nothing, and looked back down again, not sure what was going on.

"I just — I just wanted to come and say hello," he said uncertainly.

Frank's head jerked this way and that, avoiding the boy before him.

"Harry," Penelope murmured, "Mr Longbottom ... he isn't really up to —"

Harry wheeled around, cutting her off.

"He is," he insisted, "he just can't — I don't know — he just can't get the words out — that's all."

But the longer Harry waited for a sign Frank recognised him, the more he realised one wasn't going to come. There was nothing, nothing but the twisting, churning agony of utter and complete loneliness. Harry didn't know what he'd expected, but something — anything — some flicker of acknowledgment, but Frank wouldn't even look at him. He felt Penelope's eyes on him, felt her sympathy for them both.

"Some days are better than others," she said gently.

Harry shook his head bleakly; it felt like something was dying inside him — dying inside Frank. Hot tears welled in his silvered eyes.

"I — I'd like to go back now, Penelope," he mumbled thickly.

"Sir?" whispered a voice. "Master Harry? O-five-hundred. Time for your fit."

Harry didn't even ask; he just slid down to the floor and fell asleep again. The Knights needed to prod him awake to make the appropriate moans and groans for Donna. Harry drowsily drank down a cocktail of potions and fell immediately back to sleep.

It was three full days since his accident and ever since then, whenever he fell asleep, his mind just slipped out of his body whether he wanted it to or not. Right now, though, Harry was stuck. His mind was aware and 'awake', but it was locked inside his dark, slumbering body. He had not a clue how to leave his body on purpose. Not that he had anywhere to go. Frank's rejection had affected him deeply — and left him at a complete loss as to what (if anything) he was going to tell Neville.

Harry tried hard to clear his mind and deal with one problem at a time. Although technically asleep, he was uncomfortably aware of himself; he could feel his lungs wheezing, his clogged nose snoring and snuffling, his right big-toe aching and his left instep cramping. But these trifles were not what worried him. Saint Mungo's could no longer hide the fact that Harry Potter was getting better, and soon the *Daily Prophet* would be underneath Voldemort's ugly slit nose. Healer Dee said philosophical salts tethered your soul to your body, and she had a good deal more to say

on the subject but Harry hadn't really been listening. Whilst he was glad he wasn't about to lose his mind anymore, he couldn't help but wish that his philosophical-thingamabobs had held off getting better until *after* Voldemort's next dummy-spit. The waiting was the worst, knowing that any minute, any second now, his world could explode with pain, and there he'd be, trapped inside his useless body. Bloody doves.

Harry cursed himself — a lot. There had to be a way out of himself; there just had to be. Getting angry didn't seem to help, though Harry gave it a good shot. As a last resort, he tried one of Elizabeth's relaxation exercises. Contemplating sea snails and galaxies and spinning spirals, one thought led to another, then another, and as the thoughts came more easily, he found himself somehow back at doves. Thinking more clearly, now, it occurred to him that he might be able to do the eagle-owl thing again. He felt it was certainly worth a shot.

Right ... er ... Fly!

Nothing happened.

Um ... Up! Go! Levitate!

Nothing.

Wingardium Leviosa! Fly and be Free! Whoosh!

Harry felt very stupid.

Right. Think owl! Come on — be the owl!

Nothing. No, that wasn't it: he was *riding* the owl, wasn't he? Elizabeth told him sensory memories were some of the most powerful, so he conjured the familiar memory of stroking his jaw with the end of his eagle-feather quill, felt it rippling around his neck; then he imagined an eagle-owl, grey feathered with black stripes on its crown. Then he imagined climbing onto its back and wrapping his arms around its neck. Twelve inches tall and glowing a luminous gold, Harry nestled his cheek below the owl's black ear-tufts and heard a dim fluttering heartbeat. The owl shook out its wings and with great sweeping beats it soared straight through the ceiling, through the cafeteria, the roof, and high into the early morning sky, a tiny Harry hanging on for dear life.

Flying over the City of London, Harry twice nearly fell off before he realised he wasn't riding *any* old owl, he was riding *his* owl — himself. He could go anywhere — he could *fly* anywhere. Whooping with glee, he swept high over Saint Paul's, swooped through commuters spewing from underground tube stations, shimmied through the crinkly bits of Westminster. Hurting along in the wake of a mad motorcycle courier swerving in and out of the morning's peak hour traffic, he had never felt so alive, so unfettered, so free. No one, no one at all, could attack him here, not even Voldemort!

Harry had no idea what was going on back at Saint Mungo's, and he didn't much care. Even if he wanted to go back — and he didn't! — he wasn't sure he'd be able to find his way. As it turned out, he didn't have a choice in the matter. Struggling futilely against the pull of his body, he was sucked backwards in a blinding rush through the noisy streets of London. His owl tumbled tip over tail through the CCU, slammed into Harry's forehead and vanished into the ether, leaving its rider to topple onto the floor. Automatically swelling to full height, Harry ducked involuntarily as his physical body thrashed this way and that, screaming but not waking up. A pair of Knights held him down whilst a frightened Donna bound his wrists to the bed. No one showed the slightest reaction to a transparent golden boy standing amongst them.

Over the din of screeching ravens, blood-curdling screams sounded in Harry's mind, the screams of someone else — Wormtail! — being tortured by an enraged Lord Voldemort. Harry eagerly spun around, hoping to go hitch-hiking again, but could find no sign of the red-eyed creature. What he did find was Cho, pressed against a wall, clutching a breakfast tray and looking scared out of her wits. A copy of the *Daily Prophet* lay on the floor; 'POTTER SAVED' ran the headline. It seemed Wormtail had managed to delay showing his boss the paper until there was someone else around to take the blame. Voldemort released Wormtail and cursed a new victim — Yaxley, maybe. Remus rushed into the room just as Harry's convulsing body started choking on its own vomit. Remus and the Knights managed to clear his throat but couldn't rouse him.

"*Do something for him!*" Remus demanded of Donna over the mad ravens.

Donna tried to explain that she'd already given Harry both painkillers and a dreamless Sleeping Draught. Completely out of her depth, she insisted he shouldn't be experiencing anything at all. To this, Remus loosed some language that Harry had never heard before. Donna burst into tears and rushed from the room.

"*Get a proper Healer!*" Remus ordered Cho. Cho fled.

Harry couldn't give a fig about his body right now. Literally detached from his own pain, he could sense Voldemort's feelings even more sharply than normal, sensed more fully than ever before his savage, almost sensual, pleasure in casting the Cruciatus Curse. Both revolted and intrigued, Harry couldn't deny how seductive, how empowering it felt when done — correctly.

He was just thinking he should be feeling ashamed of himself for enjoying it all so much when an irresistible thrill inflamed his soul: he just caught a glimpse of Bellatrix Lestrange under Voldemort's wand. Hungering for more, Harry threw every bit of willpower he possessed into the vision, desperate to see for himself her writhing in agony. All at once everything came into focus for him. He was right there, seeing through Voldemort's slitted red-eyes. They were in some kind of dungeon — or maybe a crypt. There were no windows; tallow burned in sandstone sconces; it smelled of death and sent jaundiced light over Lestrange's terrified face. Towering over Lestrange, Harry gripped his yew wand with white, bony fingers and cried out in a high, cruel voice, "*Crucio!*"

Exhilarated by his glorious rage, by the veins popping across his silky, hairless skull, he cast the curse again, and again, exulting in Lestrange's suffering, loving the way she jerked like a cut snake on the stone floor. Far too soon, in Harry's opinion, he was done with Lestrange and new faces

fell to his wand, all of them murderous Death Eaters, all of them begging for mercy. Harry was unmoved. As far as he was concerned, they deserved everything they got! He only wished Kreacher could be with them.

"Harry!" called a distant voice.

Revulsion filled Harry's soul; how he hated that word!

"Harry!" called the voice again, louder now.

Enraged, his black silk robes billowing, he spun on his heels, screaming, "POTTER!"

Abruptly, the crypt vanished. Lupin kept calling his name, which infuriated Harry, for not only was it pointless in his sleep-drugged state, it had cost him the opportunity to exact his righteous revenge on his cowering servants. Frustrated, and craving to beat the crap out of someone, Harry's golden spirit tore from the CCU, straight through the walls and down the corridors, dodging a very determined Cho dragging a portly Healer three times her size towards his room. As they passed, Harry slid sideways through a wall. His soul, still swollen with fury, halted in shock on the other side.

Kreacher!

Rigid — as if petrified — his bulbous eyes fixed and unseeing, the ancient elf stood barefoot and in the middle of a white padded cell, his arms confined inside a child-sized straight-jacket over a tea-towel loin cloth. Crouching around him, as if a spider playing with her prey, black-skinned Megaera. She was real! Harry knew it!

In ragged robes of red and black, insect-like in her movements, the demon twisted her serpent-filled head towards Harry, smiled a terrible smile, revealing inch-long fangs, and turned away again. Her snakes weaved lazily in the air, as if gravity were for lesser beings.

"Soon, soon," they hissed contentedly.

"Deceiver," Megaera whispered into the elf's ear, her voice carrying the chill of a Dementor, "defiler of your family. He's dead because of you. Dead."

"Too right!" Harry declared aggressively.

"Dead. Dead — because — of — you," Megaera said callously, savouring each word.

Kreacher's body remained perfectly still but for a twitch of his right eye. At this minuscule movement, Megaera's snakes writhed excitedly, hissing and spitting, repeating her words, chorusing condemnations of the ancient elf.

"Deceiver," repeated Megaera, her bloody eyes glowing, "defiler of the family you swore to serve and protect."

Kreacher's chin betrayed the slightest quiver. Victorious, Megaera was endlessly patient, quietly ruthless, listing one after another of Kreacher's transgressions.

"Plotting, scheming with your master's enemies," she hissed menacingly. "You will atone for your treason!"

Kreacher's stiff body jerked involuntarily, startling Harry, breaking him from some kind of spell, but not a magical one. In the back of his mind, he heard someone crying his name. A girl. It sounded like Hermione, but Harry couldn't think about that right now. A purple Bookworm wriggled free of Kreacher's hairy ear. Megaera curled the worm around her finger, tugging it, teasing it from the lobe. Then she ate it, sucking it straight from his ear like a strand of spaghetti.

"You have no secrets from me," she growled more harshly now. Her cranial serpents were close enough to slither over Kreacher's balding head and curl around his neck. "Can you possibly believe your beloved Master Regulus will ever forgive your betrayal of his brother?"

Kreacher was vibrating, now. The demon was relentless, whispering accusations, condemnations.

"Sirius is dead because you betrayed the House of Black," she hissed in a sinister whisper. "You'll rot for eternity. But you know that, don't you?"

Megaera's smile was pure venom as Kreacher's body convulsed, his eyes bulging, his scrawny body jerking as if under electric shock.

"What are you doing?" blurted Harry. His rage doused as if with cold water, his unease intensified when he realised the demon was repeating his own words. Megaera ignored him and continued feasting on Kreacher's worms, licking them one by one from his wrinkled ear. Her serpents constricted around his neck.

"STOP IT!" yelled Harry; Kreacher was turning blue.

Megaera pushed off the elf and spun on Harry's golden form, her eyes bloody and full of righteous fury, her fangs bared, her snakes biting the air. "The servant who betrays his master must pay for his treachery! Justice demands his death!"

Harry was horrified. "Who are you to decide that?!"

Every serpent hissed, "WE ARE MEGAERA!"

"Let him go!" Harry insisted.

Blood dripped from the demon's eyes onto the padded floor. For one moment, just one horrible moment, Harry thought she would attack him — find his body and tear it to pieces.

"Mercy is for fools!" she declared unequivocally. "Or do you forget Pettigrew? Do you forget how he repaid you?"

She had a point, Harry thought. But as much as Kreacher was a pathetic, vindictive little troll, he was now Harry's pathetic, vindictive little troll. He couldn't let him be tortured to death.

"I'm his master now!" he declared more aggressively than he felt. "I decide his punishment!"

To Harry's great surprise, Megaera agreed.

"As you wish, young one," she hissed and stood back with folded arms to watch. "Do better than you did with Lestrange," she added archly.

Still rooted to the spot, Kreacher's body flailed like a loose sail flapping in the wind. More Bookworms wriggled free of his ears. Harry didn't know what to do.

"Kreacher! Stop — stop! I order you to stop!"

Choking on his own tongue, the insane elf fell to his knees.

Harry would never know what made him think to do it; he lunged for a Bookworm dangling from one hairy ear, grabbed it with golden fingers and pulled himself, shrinking as he went, through Kreacher's ear and into a mind in utter chaos. The only cogent thought repeatedly in a roiling mass of confusion was, "Kreacher must die!"

"Kreacher, stop!" cried Harry. "NO! I'm your master now! I order you to live!"

But the gagging house-elf would not be convinced so easily. The lack of oxygen was intoxicating; it promised blessed release.

"NO!" screamed Harry, feeling Kreacher's tongue swelling, filling his throat. "I ORDER YOU TO LIVE! *That's* your punishment!" he added desperately. "You've got to live — for Sirius — for Sirius!"

Megaera loosed a hideous, unearthly cackle. Through Kreacher's eyes, Harry saw black wings sprout from her back, filling the white room. Then she loosed a banshee-like shriek, dived straight through the padded floor and was gone. Not even a single blood-drop remained to show she'd ever been there. Kreacher's frail body slackened and all went black.

Lost in the darkness of the elf's mind, Harry frantically ordered him to breathe. Abruptly, he wasn't inside Kreacher's head any more. The door flew open, and a young male Healer ran into Kreacher's cell, straight through Harry's golden shade. Within moments, he'd cleared the elf's windpipe and laid him, still trussed in his straightjacket, gently on his bed. No longer catatonic, the insane elf started sobbing inconsolably.

"Master?" he whimpered tearfully to the ceiling. He was looking and feeling more lost and alone than Harry ever thought possible. "M-Master, please! Master, come back! Kreacher lives for Master. Kreacher lives! Master?"

But Harry was already whipping backwards through the wards, reeled back to his body like a fish on a line. He woke to find his chest heaving, his eyes moist, and someone shaking his shoulders. The room was full of frightened faces, his ears with shrieking ravens.

"GET OUT!" he railed, struggling to free his wrists. "GET OUT!"

"Harry, please — please!" Hermione pleaded. "You were having a nightmare — just a nightmare! You were crying out for Sirius."

His wrists bound, Harry couldn't even roll away. He squeezed shut his eyes and rasped miserably, "Get out."

He could hear someone clearing the room of visitors, hear the Healers arguing over which potions to give him. Someone freed his wrists. Harry immediately rolled over and buried his head in his pillow but couldn't suppress the dry hiccoughing of his chest. Someone was rubbing his heaving back; he didn't want to know who.

"Harry," murmured the hoarse, familiar voice of his guardian.

Harry twisted his head long enough to gasp, "Check — hic — check on Kreacher."

"Kreacher?" said Remus, bewildered. "Erm ... I will, but drink this first."

"Now!" Harry insisted.

"Kreacher the house-elf?" ventured Healer Dee.

"He belongs to Harry," explained Remus.

"I'll check on him for you later," said Healer Dee, patting Harry's leg in that particular way people had of humouring an invalid. "Now just drink this for me."

Harry wasn't of a mind to wait. Before she could stop him, he swung his legs out of bed and immediately crumpled. Remus lunged across the bed to grab him. The Healers manhandled him back in bed, muttering all the while in low voices to each other. Harry didn't care if they thought he

was nuts; he flatly refused to cooperate until he knew Kreacher was all right. One of the Healers went to check, returning shortly to report that Harry's elf had indeed suffered another "bout of guilt" and was currently curled under his bed, sobbing. The Healers didn't seem surprised.

"It's been happening on and off since he got here," Healer Dee explained resignedly. "Some days are worse than others."

"Where'd Hermione go?" Harry demanded fitfully, forgetting for a moment that he'd just yelled at her to get out. They fetched Hermione for him, but only after making him drink a tall glass of turquoise Strengthening Solution.

"Are you okay, Harry," she said, rushing to his side.

Coughing blue bile, he said, "I need — I need you to do — do something for me."

"Do you want me to get Cho for you?" she suggested hopefully. "She's right outside. Do you want her to conjure her Patronus for you again?"

If he lived to be a hundred, Harry would never understand girls.

"Find K-Kreacher — tell him I forgive him — I forgive him."

Remus gripped Harry's shoulder; Hermione's face was a study in confusion.

"Harry —" she started.

"Tell him," Harry insisted. "I saw Megaera again. I saw her — him — Kreacher'll kill himself if he gets the chance. Tell him I forgive him. Tell him he doesn't need to die. TELL HIM!"

"Oh, Harry," breathed Hermione, her eyes sparkling, "after all you've been through, you can still think of —"

"GO!" yelled Harry.

Hermione fled. Remus remained, standing watchfully by Harry's bed whilst the Healers continued bickering amongst themselves. Harry didn't care about his 'overexcited' heart chart or his 'elevated' sulphur levels; he couldn't stop thinking about Kreacher and Megaera. He knew full well that his previous possession of Kreacher, the night after his bath when he railed at him for betraying Sirius, must have contributed to his mad death-wish.

"Do better than you did with Lestrange," Megaera had said.

Harry's mind reeled. How could Megaera possibly know about him casting a Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange? Only two people knew about that: him and Lestrange. Lestrange had ridiculed his efforts, telling him he'd need more than 'righteous fury' to cast Unforgivables. Did she boast to the other Death Eaters about how pathetic his curse had been? Did she conjure some demon to mess with his head? Harry wouldn't put it past her, but why would she bother attacking Kreacher? Kreacher did exactly what she asked him to; he wasn't any great use to her dead. It was only him, Harry, who had a grudge with the elf.

Him.

Megaera using his own words to attack Kreacher haunted Harry anew. Remus called her a justice demon, just a myth Harry probably read about somewhere. Now Harry thought about it, he realised he never actually saw Kreacher respond to Megaera, never heard him speak to her. And the way she disappeared without a trace: no blood-drops, nothing. Was she real or a figment of his imagination? The part of him that craved vengeance? The part he'd need if he ever got a chance to kill Voldemort? The chance to become judge, jury, and executioner at barely sixteen. Hadn't he already started? Hadn't he gone after Bellatrix Lestrange in the Ministry to try to kill her? The only reason she wasn't dead or insane right now was because at fifteen he didn't have enough skill, or strength, or experience, or something, to do the job properly. Anxiety tightened Harry's chest. There was nothing noble about casting a Cruciatus Curse. By rights, he should be serving a life sentence in Azkaban. His soul was just as black as Voldemort's, as Lestrange's; he just wasn't as good at being evil as they were. Not until today ...

Remus, looking very grey and drawn, rested a comforting hand on his arm. Harry couldn't bear his sympathy. His chest constricted, his insides burning as the events of the last few days started falling in on him like so many hot bricks, burying him under their sheer volume: trapped in the inferno of Kreacher's fetid den; being beaten senseless by the horrifying nightmares of other patients; the relentless agony of the bath; and now casting Unforgivables with Voldemort and deliberately torturing a pathetic old elf. Harry didn't even know what was real anymore and what was fake. All he knew was that he ached to hear his mother's laugh, something so pure and good, just one more time. But was that a lie, too? Did he hallucinate the Longbottoms, too? Is that why Frank wouldn't even look at him? Harry's shaking hand found his stinging scar. Was this the only part of him that was real? The only thing he was good for?

"Harry," Remus murmured, leaning over him, "you okay?"

Yet another raven's caw sounded. Harry covered his face with his folded arms, hating himself and wishing for any life other than his own.

"Could someone please turn off that ruddy bird?" Remus growled exasperatedly. "And do you think you lot could argue outside?"

Ever the diplomat, Healer Dee turned off the chart and shooed her colleagues from the room, leaving Harry and Remus alone.

"Harry —" started Remus.

"Voldemort's gone underground," Harry blurted, needing to talk about, think about, something else. Haltingly, he told Remus all about the crypt, giving as many names and other details as he could remember, and offered no objection when Remus suggested sharing his drawings with

selected members of the Order to see if anyone recognised the town.

"He may well have moved on," Remus said bracingly, "but it's still more than we had."

Blinking, Harry nodded mutely. Remus regarded him shrewdly and took his time straightening his blankets and pouring him water.

"Rough morning?" he suggested at last in a low voice.

"Voldemort knows I'm okay," Harry said dully.

Remus grimaced sympathetically. "He possessed you?"

Harry shook his head bleakly. "We were — he was too busy cursing people. He broke the connection when he realised I was with him."

"With him ..." Remus ventured slowly. "But you got away safe?"

"Yeah, but then I —"

Harry broke off; he couldn't say it; it would make everything so — so final. Remus would never be able to look at him the same again, as if he were just a normal boy.

"But then you ..." Remus prompted encouragingly.

"I — I think I possessed Kreacher," he confessed shakily. "Or Megaera did — I think she was me — or I was her — or something — I don't know what was going on. She wanted to make him pay for what he did to Sirius. I tried to stop her, but he still nearly choked to death."

Remus needed several long moments to assimilate that.

"I don't want to hurt people," Harry vowed, his voice breaking. Despite all evidence to the contrary, he just had to believe that. "I'm not Voldemort. I'm not."

"Hey," chided Remus, smoothing Harry's sweat-matted hair, "of course you're not. The minute you woke up, you wanted to help Kreacher. No, listen to me. Listen. You clearly have some extraordinary gifts, but the greatest gift is what you just said — that you don't want to hurt people — and that's what separates you from Voldemort. Harry? Harry, look at me. I'll admit possession scares me because I know so little about it — or how I could even hope to help you — but I do know your heart controls your choices, and you may be young, but you've got one of the strongest and best hearts I know."

Harry wanted so desperately to believe him. Far from being reviled by his confession, Remus stood resolutely by his side. Remus believed in him.

"Harry, trust me," he said quietly, "I know what it is to have powers you don't want, powers you can't control. They are not what define a man."

Hermione burst into the room, declaring in a rush that she'd managed to coax Kreacher out from under his bed. He'd even calmed down enough to call her a Mudblood. Hope rekindled in Harry's heart.

"Is Cho outside?" he asked.

Whilst the Healers were off somewhere having a 'conference' about him, Harry impatiently counted the minutes for Cho to return from the task he'd given her. She had needed a great deal of persuasion, but she was the only person he could trust to get the job done. At last, she slipped back into the silent CCU.

"I did it," she said breathlessly, her face flushed. "You've got thirty minutes. Then they'll be coming around with lunch. Are you ready?"

Harry immediately tossed back the dram of Sleeping Draught she handed him and was asleep before his head hit the pillow. It took a little longer for his soul to break free of his body. As soon as he was able, he made a beeline for the Closed Ward and Neville's dad, who was also slumbering thanks to Cho. Listening hard for the man's thoughts, it didn't take long for Harry to slip quietly into his mind.

"Frank?" he called tentatively, hopefully. "It's Harry, Harry Potter."

To Harry's profound relief, he felt joy flood through Frank. Frank started spewing forth a stream of memories, as if picking straight up from their last chat three days earlier. Harry cut him off — he didn't know how much longer they had.

"Frank? Please, I need to ask you: did you know I came to see you? And with Neville ... I mean I showed you him at school. You know he's my age and all, right? Sixteen, now. Do you know that he visits you?"

Bittersweet feelings washed over Frank. He conjured a memory not from the distant past but from inside his hospital ward. It must have been Christmastime for a small tree in a cheap red pot sat on the windowsill, tired tinsel strung from its scrawny branches.

Frank was sitting in a chair by his bed, hungrily drinking in the sight of the boy before him — though he could only catch a glimpse of him every now and then because his eyes kept drifting off over his son's left shoulder. Neville had brought him a pot plant, and Frank held it tightly in his lap, careful not to let it fall. Neville told him it was a Hairy Toad Lily: *tricyrtis hirta*. It had white star-shaped flowers with purple spots. Frank knew it was

quite rare, and he was also impressed Neville managed to make it bloom in the dead of winter.

Frank's frustration mounted; his mother kept talking and talking, droning on loudly with news of the family, not letting her grandson get a word in edgeways. For his part, Neville sat slumped on Frank's bed, offering a weak smile every now and then. Augusta Longbottom finally turned her attention towards Alice. Neville looked over to his father and tried a tentative smile.

"You know what, Dad?" he said gamely. "Gran's got me doing dancing lessons now. I went to that Yule Ball last Christmas. Remember? Gran said she told you that's why I wasn't here last year."

Neville stopped to look for some sign his father was hearing him. Frank struggled to pull his eyes up from Neville's right elbow.

"Um ... anyway, I took Ginny Weasley," continued Neville. "I think I broke half her toes. She's really nice and everything, but she dumped me quick smart. Can't say I blame her." Neville shrugged resignedly. "Don't know what I was thinking — she's way out of my league. Anyway, I figured I'd better learn to dance properly. It's hard going, though, on Gran, I mean." Neville lowered his voice to confide, "But she keeps putting all these glass birds on pedestals around the parlour. It's like trying to dance through an exploding obstacle course in there. Anyway ..."

Neville's voice trailed off as Frank's eyes stubbornly drifted to the window. Neville blew out his cheeks resignedly and turned back towards where his Gran was helping Alice open a box of sweets he'd brought for her. Frank loosened his grip on his pot plant. If he could just get a bit closer, he could tap Neville's knee. Frank jerked his chair forward a little. Neville was still looking at Alice. Frank couldn't quite reach him. He jerked forward again.

CRASH!

"What? Neville! What have you done now?"

A great fuss ensued as Augusta Longbottom's wand whipped the air, cleaning up the broken pot and scattered soil. Neville scrambled around in the dirt trying to salvage the Hairy Toad Lily. Frank was furious with himself. It belatedly occurred to him that he could have just stood up. It was always like this, especially when he was wound up. He knew *what* he wanted to do, but his body never seemed to know *howto* do it at the same moment. Everything was always just out of step, always just out of reach.

"It's okay, Dad," Neville was saying reassuringly. "Don't worry about it." He gingerly inspected the smashed roots and petals. "I might be able to do something with it."

"Just throw it in the bin, Neville," ordered his grandmother impatiently. "You're getting dirt everywhere."

Frank fumed as his mother made Neville toss the plant in the bin. Soon, she was preparing to take his son away — too soon, as far as Frank was concerned. Neville left, trudging after his Gran and looking thoroughly miserable.

"Oh, Mrs Longbottom, are you leaving already?" called a Healer. Frank looked glumly down the long closed ward. *Now his eyes decide to work.*

Harry felt miserable for Frank; he knew exactly what was coming. He could see himself standing next to Gilderoy Lockhart's bed, his head spinning around at the sound of the Longbottom name.

"It's okay, Frank," Harry said sadly. "I know what happens next. I'm really sorry about all that. I couldn't think of a way to distract the others in time for Neville to leave in peace."

When the memory restarted, the visitors had all gone home. Frank shuffled over to the bin and retrieved the damaged Hairy Toad Lily. The elegant star-shaped petals hung limply now, all torn at odd angles. Frank slowly and carefully set the wilting plant to one side and picked up the Christmas tree from the windowsill. With shaking hands, he shook the tree free of its red pot and dumped it into the bin. Making a fair bit of mess, Frank collected handfuls of soil from the other pot plants and painstakingly re-potted Neville's gift. Once done, Frank fell heavily into his chair and hunched miserably over the plant in his lap, his tears falling onto the bruised and broken Lily.

With a sudden rush of understanding, Harry realised why all of Frank's other memories of Neville had been of him as an infant. It was because in those days Frank could remember being a real father to Neville, of holding him, of protecting him, of knowing at some level Neville was feeling his father's love. The memory faded, but Harry continued feeling Frank's grief, his aching torment in having been unable to even reach out a hand to touch his precious boy when he'd been sitting so achingly close, right there, right in front him.

"It'll be okay, Frank, honest," vowed Harry from the very bottom of his heart. "I'll tell him. I'll tell him everything. I'll tell him you're always listening. I'll tell him, Frank."

Harry woke to find an anxious Cho sitting by his bed, holding his hand. He squeezed it back gratefully.

"I need to see Neville."

Ten minutes later, Harry drew a deep breath as Neville came bounding into the CCU like a faithful old Labrador. Cho carefully closed the door, her job now to keep everyone else away.

"Hi, Harry!" said Neville.

"Hi ... er, we didn't really get a chance to talk yesterday."

Neville nodded. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he looked up at Harry with his trusting face and said, "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, you know, been worse. Listen, there's something I wanted to give you."

Neville's face lit up as he opened the photo album Harry handed him. "Wow, that's really nice of you, thanks!" He started flicking through the pages, laughing as he went.

"The girls wrote the captions, not me," Harry assured him.

Neville grinned. "I didn't think you put little hearts over your 'i's."

"No," agreed Harry. "Neville, look, about the album, I was kind of hoping you'd give it to your dad."

Neville's smile stiffened. "My dad?"

"Your dad," repeated Harry. "Listen, I need to tell you something, but it's complicated and you probably won't believe me, but I *really* need you to trust me on this."

Neville stared hard at his fellow Gryffindor. "You know I trust you," he said slowly.

Now the moment was upon him, Harry was at a loss what to say. 'Hey, Neville, I've been possessing your dad — he says hi!' didn't seem at all helpful. He drew another deep breath.

"See, the thing is, when I got burned, it was pretty bad — Cruciatus bad." Neville paled but nodded for Harry to go on; they both knew what that was like. "The burns were so bad my heart gave out. They reckon I died for a few minutes. They ended up replacing all my skin — fingers, toes, everything. They had me in this bath for ages with all these weird potions. It did something to me, Neville. Look, can you keep this to yourself?" Neville, who had started turning a sickly green, nodded quickly. "See, I started moving around in the astral plane. When you're dreaming and leave your body," explained Harry, for Neville's mouth was opening and closing in an excellent imitation of his pet toad. "Neville, you know I'm — well, you know ..." Harry felt his face growing hot, "... special." Neville's simple shrug of agreement spoke volumes. "Well, the thing is ... er, you know how I get visions and stuff?"

"Like your godfather being kidnapped?" suggested Neville.

Harry blushed more deeply. "No, I mean like the one last Christmas, when I had a vision that Ron's dad was attacked, and that's how they were able to find him and get him to hospital in time. That's how come we saw you and your Gran here last year. We were visiting Mr Weasley."

Neville absorbed that; Harry sensed a twinge of lingering bitterness.

"Why d'you have to come up to the Closed Ward then?" Neville asked.

"We didn't mean to — honest," Harry assured him. "We were just going to the cafeteria and Lockhart roped us in to visit him. We had *no* idea you were there." Neville nodded slowly to that, curiosity stirring again. "Anyway, there's this, um, this ability I have," continued Harry. "When I'm out of my body, I can see things a long way away, like Mr Weasley being attacked. But there's something else. You need to keep this to yourself, okay? I haven't even told Ron or Hermione."

Neville nodded encouragingly and said in his simple, straightforward way, "You can trust me, Harry."

And Harry knew he could. "The thing is, since the accident, I can visit people far away ... talk to them. Neville, I talked to your dad."

Neville's mouth hung open in disbelief. Powerful emotions boiled up inside of him.

"What did he say?" he croaked.

Flummoxed, Harry hadn't expected Neville to believe him straight away. "He wanted to know all about *you*, about everything in your life; he couldn't get enough. He really loves you, Neville."

A painful sob escaped Neville's lips. He jerked to his feet and stumbled backwards, stammering, "I — I have to ... I ..."

Neville fled. Two seconds later, Cho ran into the room.

"What happened? Is he okay? Are you?"

Harry struggled to calm himself from the fallout of his friend's emotions. He knew exactly where Neville had gone. He would've bolted straight for his father, too. Harry wanted to go after him, but first he had to get past his guards. Cho straight out lied to the Knights, assuring them that the Healers wanted Harry to get some exercise, and soon Harry was standing outside the flowery curtains drawn across the Longbottoms' beds. Stifled sobs sounded from the other side of the curtain. Harry wanted to go in alone, but the Knights were having none of that.

"Look," hissed Harry, pulling them aside, "my friend's in there and he's really upset and I know you've got your Foe Detectors, what else do you need?"

The guards were sympathetic, but they weren't about to let Harry — Disillusioned or not — out of their sight.

"We'll be discreet," they assured him.

Harry slipped through the curtains. Neville sat slumped on the floor under the window, hugging his knees and hiccupping painful sobs as he watched his mother staring dreamily into space. Alice was plucking tiny feathers one by one from inside a pillow. She threw each one as high in the air as she could. Harry followed the feather upwards and his mouth fell open. The ceiling was covered by Frank's thin paper strips; they were stuck on messily with bits of Spello-tape and chewing gum and connected together to form what looked like an enormous spider web.

Harry couldn't see where the guards had gotten to, but he felt one of them break the Disillusionment Charm over his head. Neville jerked to his feet when he saw Harry. His eyes burned accusingly.

"You think this is f-funny, do you?" he shot.

Harry's eyes widened in horror. "No — no — I never ..."

Neville glared at him.

"Don't you see?" Harry pleaded, looking up. "Your dad, he can see and hear everything you tell him, but he's trapped, like — like a fly in a web."

Frank was sitting on his bed, staring up at the spider-webbed ceiling. He was perfectly still but for a twitch in his right shoulder.

"Are you having a laugh?" Neville challenged Harry tremulously, strong emotions rolling off him in waves.

A sheen of sweat formed on Harry's brow and he swayed a little.

"Hairy Toad Lily!" he declared desperately. "Last Christmas — you gave your dad one — he told me all about it."

Unconvinced, Neville hiccupped again.

"Neville, I am not making this up!" pleaded Harry. "He told me everything."

"You were here last Christmas," said Neville accusingly. "You could've seen me bring it in."

Harry's words tumbled out in a rush. "It was white and purple and your dad dropped it and it smashed on the floor and — and you tried to save it, but your Gran made you throw it away. Your dad — he saved it from the bin and tried to plant it again." Neville remained sceptical. "Right," Harry said with mounting frustration, "I guess you think I could've seen that, too."

Neville was blinking rapidly. Harry knew he dearly wanted to believe him, but he needed something — anything. Unfortunately, Harry couldn't think of one thing Frank Longbottom told him that he couldn't have found out just by snooping around.

"Neville, you *have* to trust me on this!" insisted Harry, growing angry now. "Don't you think I know how hard it is to grow up without your mum and dad? Do you *really* think I would joke about something like this?" Harry grabbed Frank's shoulder to steady himself and added in a voice cracking with emotion, "I'd give *anything* for this to be my dad."

Tears streamed down Neville's face and Harry knew he believed him. No matter what proof he might have been able to provide, nothing could have convinced him more than that.

Neville looked anxiously up at the spider-webbed ceiling and blurted through his hiccoughs, "Wh — what should I — hic — what should I do, Harry?"

Harry sank with relief onto the bed next to Frank. "Just talk to him; he can understand everything you tell him. And send him letters, too, he can still read. And show him your album; I know he'd love to see that. He has trouble moving his body, especially his eyes — they go everywhere but where he wants them to — but he's always trying to look at you. You just have to be *really* patient. It's hardest for him when he's worked up."

Neville swiped his running nose on his sleeve and inched closer to his father, then glanced back at his mother. She'd stopped throwing feathers. Tears shone in her eyes. Neville turned back to his father and moistened his lips.

"Dad?" he said.

Frank's head jerked a little and he looked away from his son. Harry reached around and twisted Frank's head back towards them. A ghost of a smile flitted across the man's lined face.

"Did you see that?" blurted Neville.

Harry beamed at father and son. Possession might be evil when Voldemort did it, but Harry would defy anyone who said that the look of hope shining in Neville's eyes could be the result of Dark Magic.

"I reckon you two can take it from here," Harry said weakly, spent but happy. He stood up a bit too quickly and clutched for the bedpost for support. He missed, and would've fallen, but a hand grabbed him in time. It wasn't Neville.

"Thanks," Harry muttered under his breath to whichever of the Knights had caught him. "I'll see you later, Frank," he added. Turning to leave, he found Alice in his path, timidly holding out her hand to him. Harry gently accepted one of her little white feathers.

"Thanks very much, Mrs Longbottom."

Neville still looked lost. "What should I do, Harry?"

Harry looked back to Frank and Neville and felt a powerful ache of longing for his own dad.

"I'd give him a hug ..." he suggested huskily, "... he could really use a hug."

Harry felt a crack over his head and he immediately blended into the flowery curtains. The Peacock Knights didn't say anything on the way back to the CCU, and Harry had no idea what it was they thought was going on, but their attitudes toward him seemed to have shifted gears somehow, as if their protectiveness had suddenly got a lot more personal.

Thoroughly spent, Harry was resting alone in his circular hell when he heard people arguing heatedly outside. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he was sure that one of them was Remus. Slipping out of bed, he crept to the door and opened it slightly to glimpse his guardian surrounded by half a dozen Healers.

"Bed, Master Harry," one of the Knights said chidingly and firmly closed the door on him.

Harry leaned his forehead into the now solid door, wanting — craving — more than anything to go home, to get back to some kind of normal, just him and Remus. At dinner time, his spirits took an upturn when Remus returned carrying a bag of street clothes.

"Did the Healers say I can go home?" Harry asked, immediately pushing his dinner tray away and climbing out of bed.

"No," said Remus flatly, dropping the bag on the bed. "They think it best to keep you here for the rest of summer; I think it best to get you as far away from this place as possible. Of course, if you'd rather stay, you're welcome to — *umph*."

Remus broke off, winded. There were a lot of things Harry couldn't say that went into that hug.

"Now, you're going to need to take quite a few potions each day," Remus warned him. "Elizabeth is down at the Apothecary getting supplies sorted as we speak. And you'll want to take it easy for a while: rest, fresh air, exercise ..."

Harry's head nearly fell off from nodding.

"Right then," continued Remus, cracking a smile, "just relax for a bit and eat your dinner. There's about a mile of red tape I need to fill in to get you released."

As soon as Remus was gone, Harry grabbed the Knights; he didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to the Longbottoms. Neville had already gone home, and Harry sat Frank and Alice down together and explained that he was leaving.

"I want to thank you for telling me about Mum and Dad," he whispered, glancing back at the Knights (who, to be fair, were doing their best not to listen), "it was just brilliant, really. But look, you're going to get out of here. I'm not sure how or when," he admitted, "but you have to trust me on that."

Frank smiled slightly at his knee. Harry leaned closer.

"It's gonna be okay, I promise." He offered a small, self-deprecating smile and added, "See, apparently, I've got this daft 'saving people' thing."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 22 – Black Island

Harry squinted out his window onto a drizzly Saturday morning that failed to dampen his spirits one iota. There could be no reconnaissance today, and Remus promised a visit to Black Island if he felt strong enough. Stretching luxuriously in a bed with no ropes, in a room with no guards, in a house with no crazy people, Harry decided he felt fabulous. He also decided that Remus only said yes to distract him from asking why Elizabeth had moved out. She had made herself scarce the previous evening, insisting Harry shouldn't need to put up with company on his first night home. She went instead to the island to double-check its security and to let the house-elves know about Sirius. When she returned through the grandfather clock, her eyes were red and puffy and she didn't stay long before leaving for the Leaky Cauldron to brew Harry's potions for the next morning, which Harry didn't understand at all since they had a perfectly good potions lab in Black House. 'It's complicated' was all Harry could get out of Remus on the topic. Elizabeth returned next morning with a tray full of multi-coloured sludge. The Lupins' polite smiles for each other didn't fool Harry one little bit, and the moment Elizabeth set her tray down on the kitchen counter, Remus found a need to water his orchids.

Though he'd never admit it, Harry wished Hermione was around to explain what was going on, but the Grangers had delayed their holiday to the Lakes District long enough, and Harry insisted she quit fussing over him and go and have some fun. He still had Ron, whom he'd be seeing tomorrow, but didn't hold out much hope for romance insights there.

"Come on," Elizabeth said to Harry in a determinedly bright voice, "bottoms up. They're not that bad."

Harry could not agree with that assessment, but he resignedly complied, picking out the least smelly glass of gunk first.

"You know," he said, burping liver-oil, "— beg pardon — that Brain Booster potion you made me the other night was *brilliant*."

That earned a genuine smile from his godmother. "I'll see what I can arrange. Do you mind if I ...?"

With a small sigh, Harry sat down and removed his glasses.

"The eyes are a window to the soul," she explained, inches from his face with a huge magnifying glass. "They'll let us know."

"Know what?"

"When you're done," she murmured, peering one-eyed into his half-green, half-silver orbs.

Harry returned the inspection, staring back into her enormous eye, wondering what he would see, but it was just an eyeball to him: the whites slightly red; the black pupil huge inside a deep blue. At last, she pulled away and patted his cheek affectionately.

"Getting there," she said. "As the quicksilver dissipates, you should start feeling less emotional static from other people."

Harry wasn't quite sure how he felt about that. Although exhausting, it could prove handy, especially right now.

"How much longer do you reckon?" he asked, putting his spectacles back on.

"Depends on how quickly you consume it. Could be days, could be weeks. Hopefully, with a bit of peace and quiet you'll be able to wean off so gradually you'll hardly notice."

Harry nodded to that and finished his potions in a rush, wanting to get it over with. Elizabeth winced in apology when he needed to hold his nose to get the last one down.

"No, I'm okay — okay," he assured her after almost throwing it back up.

With or without the quicksilver in his system, he was startled when Elizabeth pulled him into a hug.

"It's so good to get you home," she whispered over his shoulder. When she pulled back, her eyes were moist and she made herself busy cleaning up all the dirty glasses. "We'll get going in a bit," she said thickly into the kitchen sink. "Maybe you should find Remus."

Harry rocked excitedly on his heels as Elizabeth dialled the grandfather clock's hands forward to exactly eleven o'clock.

"Uncle Alphard didn't approve of callers before eleven," she explained over the chimes.

Following his godmother, Harry stuck one leg through the long, slim doorway. The rest of his body was sucked inside and he tumbled through a dizzying cacophony of peeling chimes and brass cogs tick-tocking crazily all around him, landing with a thud on the other side. Elizabeth yanked him out of the way as Remus almost landed on top of him. Pushing his dislodged glasses back up the bridge of his nose, he looked around to find himself in a cool, white foyer. The smell hit him straight away: crisp salt air and sandalwood. An oversize Chinese vase stood near the front door, jammed full of elaborately carved walking-sticks, some of which seemed to be alive (Harry felt sure one serpent-headed stick winked at him).

Around the walls, mounted on pedestals, were marble busts of ancient poets, alchemists and philosophers. Harry recognised some from his trading card collection: Paracelsus, Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, Socrates, Andreas Libavius, Circe, Cicero, Nicolas Flamel and his wife Perenelle to name a few. The busts regarded Harry curiously and bowed their heads in welcome. Harry self-consciously bowed back.

"Come on," Elizabeth said encouragingly, taking Harry's hand and leading him to the front door, "they're dying to meet you."

Harry discovered it wasn't a house he was leaving; rather, he had just exited a single octagonal building nestled within a sandalwood grove. Officially called the Oratoria, Elizabeth called it the Chat Room because the busts liked nothing better than talking to each other — sometimes all day and all night depending on how heated the discussions. Paracelsus had been so furious with Libavius during one three-day marathon that he actually fell off his pedestal and had to be taken away for repairs.

Amused, Harry said, "What were they arguing about?"

"The distinction between Dark Arts and Light Arts," replied Elizabeth as they ambled down a jasmine scented path. "Paracelsus argued that anything that man was able to conjure with the abilities God gave him, whether it be Light or Dark in nature, *must* be good or he wouldn't have been given those abilities in the first place. Funnily enough," she said wryly, "his views met some opposition from more ethically minded busts."

Harry said nothing to that; he was still feeling very guilty about his own recent dabbling with Darkness — and deeply thankful that his godmother knew nothing about any of it.

"Paracelsus was never a very gracious debater," Elizabeth continued. "He's rather prone to throwing *major* tantrums whenever people disagree with him. While he was off for repairs, the rest of the busts *begged* Alphard to find a new home for him."

"But he's still there," said Harry.

"That he is," agreed Elizabeth. "Alphard said he'd be quite happy to find a nice secluded spot for him if the rest of the busts could convince him that suppressing freedom of speech was ethical. *Well*," she said, rolling her eyes, "that debate lasted a good two months. The busts tried out every argument they could think of, but they knew deep down Alphard was right and, as you saw, the Prince of Potions is still there."

"Prince? Was he really that good?" asked Harry curiously.

"Great," said Elizabeth cryptically, "not necessarily good."

The path widened, opening onto a scene straight out of one of Aunt Marge's holiday postcards. Under a brilliant-blue sky stood a strangely small-scale, two-storey, whitewashed villa with a red-tiled roof and window boxes filled with pretty begonias and herbs. Bending low, Elizabeth ushered Harry and Remus through a small blue door and into a sunny kitchen where Remus was obliged to slouch to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling timbers.

"Er —" said Harry.

Standing before him were two of the unhappiest house-elves he'd ever seen in his life (and he knew Winky). Each elderly elf was draped in fat black palm fronds and each was holding what looked like a child's tin lunch box.

"No — no — no!" Elizabeth cried, rushing forward. "Give me those this instant!"

"No!" blurted one, a female by the sound of it, clutching her lunch box tightly to her chest. Her lips were quivering and her huge eyes brimmed with tears. "Lovey is f-f-free now," she declared tremulously.

Harry noticed the second elf, presumably Dovey, was standing very straight with his chin up, though his eyes, too, were sparkling with tears. Elizabeth pulled Harry and Remus aside.

"I was afraid of this," she whispered. "I thought I got through to them last night. Lovey and Dovey don't feel they can stay now that Alphard Black's heir is dead, and they don't believe any new family could ever want or need such old elves. I tried to convince them that freedom wasn't so bad, but they're of the old school. And they wouldn't let *me* enslave them, either, because they know I don't *need* them ... and when no one needs you any more ..."

Elizabeth's voice trailed off — her eyes looked rather moist, too. The elves were standing as still as they could, though Harry saw their knobbly knees were knocking. He could easily sense their overwhelming grief, their fear, their desperate resolve to —

"What are those lunch boxes for?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Elizabeth shuddered. "You don't want to know."

"Right," Harry said grimly. He did not need any more suicidal elves. He strode over to the pair and stood over them, crossed his arms across his chest and said loudly and clearly, "My name is Harry Potter and I'm Sirius Black's godson and I'm his heir and I own this island and I'm ordering you to stay on and take care of it for me."

It took Harry quite some time to free his knees.

Leaving a much happier kitchen, Elizabeth led Harry and Remus out onto a wide, wisteria-covered terrace overlooking a central lake fringed with jungle-covered mountains and massive waterfalls. Plump-cushioned cane chairs promised sleepy afternoons carefully monitoring the situation. Right on cue, a flock of swans glided past.

Leaving the White Villa, Elizabeth guided an increasingly gob-smacked Harry and Remus around the island complex. Numerous limestone buildings dotted the vast manicured gardens with stunning views in every direction: painting and sculpture studios, elegant guest bungalows, a

luxurious Roman bathhouse and much more. There was even a building whose sole function seemed to be to display a collection of musty old Egyptian mummies. The buildings were connected by vine-covered arcades and interspersed with pools, fountains, and places to just sit and think. Harry found it decidedly weird to be walking through buildings filled with fresh linen, fruit and flowers, as if the proper inhabitants had just stepped out for the morning. It felt like everything should have been in ruins, some ancient city known only by its foundation stones. As it was, the island was unravaged by time. It lacked only one thing: people.

But the island was not exactly unpopulated. Scattered around the grounds were Alphard's Marbles. Alphard Black had been quite a collector, Elizabeth told them, and many of his ancient statues were thousands of years old and of exquisite quality. Harry spotted several gossiping together in the bushes. He had a shrewd idea *he* was the hottest topic of discussion today. As soon as he came near, they'd scurry back to their plinths and strike impressive poses for him, giving him discreet winks and waves. Harry grinned and waved back.

"They don't seem to have any trouble moving around," he observed, spotting more figures darting through the foliage.

"Stone is more fluid than people think," Elizabeth mused. She paused by a large fish pond and gazed fondly at a golden-haired cupid doing laps on the back of a black marble dolphin. "Staying still is how they relax, but when the mood takes them, the stone comes alive. They never stray too far, though; the sculptor's heart always pulls them back to their plinths. They get quite agitated, in fact, if they're away too long. Hey! Stop that!"

Elizabeth hurried Harry away from the giggling cupid, who had just started shooting golden arrows at her and Remus.

"This is the Grand Salon," she announced, leading Remus and Harry into a large building. It looked like it might have been a temple at some time. Right now, it was a single vast room with a vaulted wooden ceiling beneath which dangled low fans circulating a cool breeze. French doors opened on all sides onto tropical gardens and a pristine swimming pool. The Grand Salon had elegant sofas, well-stocked bookshelves, delicate ferns, and exotic curios artfully placed around the room, which meant little to Harry, but his interest was piqued on seeing a glossy-brown grand piano. Glad to sit down for a bit, he toyed with the keys, creating nonsense sounds.

"Chi è là? Lily?" sounded a new voice.

Harry looked up to see a bearded ghost drift past, magnificently attired in silvery robes. But the ghost was sleeping — his eyes were closed. It didn't take much effort to guess what had killed him; he had a pool cue sticking out of his chest.

"Andrea di buon giorno," said Elizabeth affectionately, "è Elizabeth."

"Eleezabetta!" cried the sleeping ghost, throwing his hands up. "Tesorina! You are gone too long!"

"True," Elizabeth said fondly. "Andrea, may I introduce our young pianist, my godson, Harry James Potter. Harry, this is Maestro Andrea Benito Virgile, one of the finest Italian tenors ever to grace the boards of La Scala."

Harry nodded politely. Elizabeth shook her head and silently tapped her eyes.

"Oh, how do you do, er, Maestro," Harry said loudly, belatedly realising the wizard was blind.

"You must call me Andrea," declared the tenor genially. "Your fingers, they have a softness."

Harry looked at his fingers, which were still rather tender from being regrown in the bath. "Erm, thanks."

"Prego," said Andrea amiably. "I think I hear my Lily and I come," he added with an apologetic shrug.

"Harry is Lily's son, Andrea," said Elizabeth.

"Bene!" Andrea cried, delighted.

Harry smiled broadly. "Did you know my mum, Andrea?"

"Sì, sì," nodded Andrea, rocking happily on his cue-stick. Then he frowned and wagged a finger in the air. "But your papa, him I like not so much."

"Your parents spent their honeymoon here on the island," Elizabeth told Harry with a crooked smile, "and you turned up nine months later."

"Sì," tuttered Andrea, "the husband, he take her always away from me." The Maestro sighed dramatically and added resignedly, "But young lovers will do what young lovers will do ..."

"Ah, yes," said Remus, grinning wickedly. "I do seem to recall James saying something about wanting to get Lily into a bikini, or maybe it was out of a bikini ..."

Harry squirmed. Way too much information.

"Signor?" prompted Andrea.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Andrea," said Elizabeth. "Allow me to introduce my husband, Remus John Lupin."

"Husband?" Andrea threw up his hands in despair. "Eleezabetta, what do you do to me? You pierce my heart!"

"Good day, Maestro," said Remus pleasantly.

Andrea looked most put out. "So, this is why you stop to come to me? Papa forbids you?"

Elizabeth's mouth opened and closed several times as she struggled to think of a response.

"I'm afraid you've caught me out, Maestro," Remus said smoothly, "but you must forgive a man for wanting to keep such a treasure all to himself."

Andrea sighed melodramatically. "This is true," he conceded sadly.

Remus's smile faded a little. He kept trying to catch Elizabeth's eye, but she kept finding other things to look at.

"Alphard and my parents were old friends," she told Harry, "and I brought your mother with me once. We got to stay the *whole* summer. If I recall correctly, it was the summer after Lily freed Mother's favourite house-elf. Leaning against the piano, she looked around the salon and smiled reminiscently. "We'd spend the evenings in here. Lily would play the piano and Andrea would grace us with his voice."

Harry caressed the cool ivory keys. His mother had been here. Right here ...

"We'll catch up later, Andrea," Elizabeth promised the ghost. She led Remus and Harry out onto the Grand Salon's wide stone portico, past huge temple-like columns and down the sun-drenched steps. Stopping suddenly, she said, "Have you taken your sun-protection potion, Harry? Your scar is already pinking up."

Harry reflexively felt for his scar and shrugged resignedly; he knew it had been too good to last.

Laying flat on his belly, Harry peered intently into a watery rock crevice. He was *sure* he'd seen it. Elizabeth and Remus had finally let him go down to the beach but not before making him wait while Elizabeth went home to fetch potions and wide-brimmed pointed hats for everyone. A slimy grey-green feeler drifted back into view and Harry made a grab for it.

"Ha!" he said, delighted. *Gillyweed!*

Twisting around, he looked back down the beach to where Remus and Elizabeth were kicking the water slapping the shore. The subtle tension between the estranged pair just seemed to be getting thicker and thicker. Harry had tried to make himself scarce to give them a chance to talk, but they didn't seem to be doing much talking, and you could fly a Hippogriff through the distance between their bodies.

Back up at the White Villa, Lovey and Dovey served them a mouth-watering luncheon of fresh seafood and fruit on the terrace. The terrace afforded excellent views over the lake, but Harry was more interested in watching his godmother and his guardian dancing around each other. They were clearly making an effort to be all cheery, and Harry played along, but he knew they were both feeling conflicted about each other: confused and hesitant and tender and joking all at once. It made for fascinating viewing.

Harry was just wrestling with a crab-claw when his godmother slid her wand over and discreetly tapped the orange shell. The shell immediately vanished, leaving only succulent meat on Harry's plate. Harry thought that was *definitely* a spell worth learning. He very much enjoyed the food but did tend to stick to things he actually recognised. And he unwittingly caused a panic in the kitchen when he innocently asked if there were any hot chips and ketchup. The elves could only be pacified when Master Harry promised to give them a detailed list of all his favourite foods for future reference.

"So," Harry said to Elizabeth, "it was just you and Sirius who came here?"

"Oh no, not at all," she replied. "Other visitors came at different times, though never more than a dozen complete. Alphard hated crowds, but he loved company. There were always fascinating people around his table. My parents visited, of course, but Alphard's social circle tended to be more centred in the Med: Egypt, Greece, Crete, Italy ..."

"They all came through Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked sceptically. He couldn't see Mrs Black putting up with that.

"Oh no," said Elizabeth, grimacing at the thought. "Hardly anyone ever came that way, only Sirius and his father, really." Her eyes glazed over dreamily. "It was always so exciting seeing a new carpet come in to land, trying to guess just who'd be at table that night. Depending on who he was expecting, Alphard would just float the island off the coast near Rome, or Cairo, or even Brighton and people would Apparate or fly in. No one ever knew the island's true home was here off Carthage."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "The island really floats?"

"I'll show you the Bridge later," she said. "There's this *huge* steering wheel. The summer after first year, Sirius brought your father here and they managed to cause quite a fuss in the Bay of Naples." Elizabeth leaned forward and her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Uncle Alphard parked the island and went off to visit some friends in Sorrento, you see, and James and Sirius sneaked up to the Wheelhouse and started making waves. Literally. The locals thought Vesuvius was about to blow."

Harry laughed loudly at the idea of Sirius and his dad doing wheelies with the island. Remus chuckled and Elizabeth shook her head wryly.

"The poor Marbles never knew what hit them. The sculpture studio was kept busy with repairs for a good two years. I'm afraid your father wasn't invited back after first year. And since James couldn't come, Sirius lost interest, too. He much preferred holidaying with the Potters."

"Hey!" blurted Harry suddenly. He looked under the table to find a large bird trying to nestle between his legs. "Get out of that!" he cried.

Remus and Elizabeth's heads ducked under the table and they burst out laughing as Harry tried to shoo the bird away. It looked like a swan, but it was smaller — petite, even. Unlike any swan he had seen before, it had a pure-white body, but from where its long neck started, it was jet-black all the way up to its bulbous bright-red bill.

"Go on, shoo," Harry begged, but the bird just laid its head on his knee and wouldn't budge.

Remus and Elizabeth simply chuckled at Harry's predicament and the lad scowled at them. Hang on — he had servants, didn't he?

"Dovey!" he bellowed.

After lunch, they headed back to the beach, wide-brimmed hats on their heads and the penetrating warmth of the sun on their backs. Harry owned no swimming trunks, and Elizabeth volunteered to pop back to London to 'pick up a few things' for him. Continuing down the beach with Remus, Harry spotted the black-necked swan waddling towards him, but then Dovey appeared to shoo it away. The swan reminded Harry of Cho and his thoughts turned to how she'd been when they'd said goodbye. She was starting to see his life as it truly was, and though she tried to make out she was fine about everything, Harry knew she really wasn't. And even if they got past all the possession stuff and the jealousy stuff and all the other messed-up stuff, what was left for him? Tea parties at Madam-sodding-Puddifoots? Reciting poetry like some love-struck idiot? Frustrated, he kicked fitfully at the fine sand.

And now he had sand in his shoes. Discarding his trainers and socks, he discovered to his dismay that Mediterranean sand was really hot. Diverting from the beach, Remus led Harry into the blessedly cool shade of the tropical gardens.

"Aphrodite," Remus murmured. "Goddess of Love," he explained, pointing out a marble of a beautiful young woman rising from the centre of a small stone pond. The water bubbled and swirled boisterously around her feet, as if she were rising from the sea. In her right hand, she held a golden apple that glinted like a Snitch in the dappled sunlight. Half-draped in skimpy robes, her long hair curled around her, strategically placed for modesty.

"Pretty," Harry observed admiringly.

Aphrodite smiled serenely and shook out her marble hair to better display her charms. Apparently, she wasn't *that* modest. Remus flopped down next to the fountain and Harry joined him. Letting the heat of the day burn off, they just lay there on the manicured grass, dozing under the brims of their pointed hats and feeling comfortably full from lunch.

"So," drawled Remus, "been riding any good chariots lately?"

Harry froze. The Psycho-Healer! He sneaked a glance towards his guardian and found a smile tweaking the corners of his mouth.

"Well," Harry offered reasonably, "she did say I needed to reach out and 'embrace my inner child'."

Chuckling, Remus rolled onto his side to face him.

"You've been very quiet today," he observed mildly. "Are you worried about the Inquest? You know you don't need to be there ..."

Harry followed his gaze to his wrist and the moodstone that had been charmed by Snape to drag him into hell. Professor Dumbledore had personally removed all trace of the security charm, and though no one expected Harry to want to wear it, Harry wanted to show that he didn't care, which he did, of course, but that was beside the point.

"No, I want to," he said firmly. There was *no way* he was missing seeing Snape getting his arse kicked.

Remus nodded slowly. "Something else bothering you?"

"It's not important," mumbled Harry. Remus didn't press; he just dragged his fingers lazily through Aphrodite's jets of bubbling water. "Well, kind of ..." Harry admitted, "about Cho, maybe ..."

Remus nodded encouragingly, but now that Harry had started, he didn't quite know where to begin, everything he wanted to say seemed so ... so petty. He jerked to his feet and started pacing around the fountain, trying to think.

"Well, I mean, I like her, right?" he said finally. "But there's all this stuff she wants I'm just not ready for."

Remus blinked. "Oh." He sat up straighter and seemed to steel himself. "Well, er, that's understandable; you're only just sixteen, after all."

"Yeah!" Harry agreed emphatically, still pacing. "Why does everything have to be so complicated?"

"Er," said Remus.

"Isn't there a manual or something?" moaned Harry.

"A manual," Remus repeated blankly. He scratched his head. "Er ... well ... I might be able to find something —"

"I mean, it's ridiculous!" complained Harry. "I mean, where am I supposed to learn poetry?"

Remus stared. "Cho wants you to write poetry for her?" he asked carefully.

"What?" Harry started in alarm. "Do you think so? Arghh, this is nuts!"

Remus chuckled, but stopped at a glare from his ward. "Sorry, sorry. Nuts. Right. Keep going."

Harry crouched against the edge of Aphrodite's fountain and stared miserably into the bubbling water.

"I just don't get girls *at all*."

"So ... erm, is something in particular worrying you about Cho?" asked Remus. "Apart from poetry, I mean."

Harry shrugged and jabbed his hand into the swirling water.

"I thought you were pretty keen on her ..." suggested Remus.

"Well, yeah," said Harry. "I mean, she's the only girl I've ever been interested in, but see ..." Harry broke off, a confused jumble of grievances boiling up inside him. He jumped edgily to his feet and started pacing again. "See, I've fancied her *forever*," he blurted plaintively, "but I don't understand where she's coming from half the time. Like she was all jealous about me kissing Parvati — as if I could help that — and Hermione, too, right? And there was *no* reason! I mean, so what if it was Valentine's Day!"

Remus looked like he was trying hard to keep up. "You and Hermione ...?"

Harry impatiently brushed that aside. "And even if she says she's okay about Hermione and Parvati, there's still that whole Marietta fiasco. That's bound to blow up again when we go back to school. I don't even know what I want to do *there*!"

Remus was scratching his head again.

"Marietta was the one you met that day in Diagon Alley?" he guessed.

"*What? No way!*" Harry screwed up his face in disgust at the very thought. "Marietta *betrayed* me!"

"Oh, right," said Remus. "Erm, so the other girl — the one you met in Diagon Alley — you don't like her?"

"*What? No*," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I do, but there's really no point; nothing's going to happen *there*."

"I see," said Remus, failing to hide a smile. "And you say that Cho's the only girl you've ever been interested in?"

Harry frowned. "That's right, yeah. What's so funny?"

Remus assembled his poker face, but Harry knew better and scowled at him.

"I knew I shouldn't have said anything!"

"No, no, no," Remus said contritely. "Sorry — I'm sorry. Please, go on."

Harry looked dubiously down at his greying guardian. This stuff was definitely a lot easier with Bill Weasley. Harry felt more confused now than when he started!

"What about you?" he challenged his guardian irritably, flopping back down onto the grass. "You want *me* to talk, but you never tell me what's going on with *you!*"

Harry half-expected a clip around the ears but none came. Remus just looked at him thoughtfully. Slowly, the man's light-hearted demeanour fell away, leaving eyes that were immeasurably sad.

"What would you like to know, Harry?" he asked quietly.

Harry stared into his unguarded face and knew — just knew — that whatever he asked right now, Remus would tell him.

"Only what you want me to know," Harry said apologetically.

Remus nodded slowly and took a moment to collect his thoughts.

"It was ten summers ago," he said in his low, hoarse voice. "Professor Dumbledore had placed an advertisement in the *Prophet* for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position." Remus smiled sadly. "It seems to have been a jinxed position a good long while now."

Harry nodded; he'd never known a DADA teacher to last more than a year.

"I was twenty-seven at the time," continued Remus, "Lizzie and I had been married for three years. We had a few hurdles to overcome before we got married, but things were finally looking up for us. I'd never been happier, in fact. I'd been starting to earn a small income from my orchids. Not a lot, but it was something. I thought I'd take my chances and apply for the Hogwarts position. This was long before the Wolfsbane Potion, of course, but I'd lived there for seven years using the Shrieking Shack; I thought it would be safe enough, even without my friends to keep me company. Professor Dumbledore was good enough to give me a chance and I was all set to start the following term. There were a few trips back and forth to sort out lesson plans and accommodations. It was on one of those trips that it happened. Harry, I know you share everything with Ron and Hermione, but ..."

"I wouldn't," said Harry loyally, "you have my word."

Remus nodded and they both looked up at Aphrodite. She twisted her fingers against her lips as if locking them.

"Funny thing is," Remus observed bitterly, "I wasn't even thirsty. Sibyll Trelawney cornered me in the staff room, you see, insisted on doing a tealeaf reading. She was just in the middle of predicting I'd soon be joining her Crystal Ball Gazing Club when her eyes rolled back into her head and she slipped into a trance. She started reciting a prophecy ... she remembered nothing afterwards ..."

Ice crept over Harry, as if a Dementor were closing in on him.

"The prophecy — it was in two parts ..." Remus continued painfully, staring at the grass, every word costing him, "the first part was about me. That I would — that I'd bite my beloved Lizzie."

A cold hand gripped Harry's throat, choking him — choking Remus.

"So you left," Harry rasped dazedly. "You left rather than turn her into a werewolf."

"I left," Remus agreed hoarsely. "I panicked. I couldn't bear the thought — the risk — of even being in the same country as her. I disappeared. I didn't tell anyone — not even Professor Dumbledore."

"But ..." said Harry, "but you told Elizabeth, right? She knows why you left her?"

"She knows that part of it, yes," admitted Remus. "Idiot that I am, I thought leaving a letter was the best course of action. She tracked me down in Europe. I'd gone to ground in the Black Forest, living hand to mouth, cutting myself off from everyone and everything. I didn't want to be found but she found me anyway. I tried to tell her it was over between us, that I didn't love her any more. It wasn't pretty and it was all for nothing — she saw straight through me. She always could. It killed me, but I finally made her understand there was no hope for us. Not any more. We knew Sibyll Trelawney had made a prophecy connecting you and Lord Voldemort and that, whatever it was, most of us believed it must have come to pass the night he tried to kill you." Remus laughed bitterly again. "Sibyll's seer credential's were — are — impeccable."

Harry stared bleakly at the man, his throat burning to think of him holed up in misery in some dank, evil forest. And to think that just five minutes ago, he, the Brat-Who-Lived, had been whining about his stupid love life.

"So ... she moved to Canada ..." Harry said.

"She said that —" Remus's voice cracked and he was obliged to clear his throat. "She said she didn't want me living in exile. I eventually returned to England, but I wasn't much use to anyone for a long while."

"And you never saw her again," Harry said thickly.

Remus shook his head slightly. "I knew if I did ... I knew I wouldn't have the strength to say goodbye twice."

A thick silence fell, broken at last by Harry.

"But — but why does it have to be like that?" he blurted. "It's just once a month ..."

Remus shook his head sadly. "Accidents happen, son. I wasn't about to risk *her* life for *my* happiness."

"What about *her* happiness?" Harry argued doggedly. "She must have been devastated."

Remus's face screwed in pain. "She deserves so much more than I can give her: a husband, children, a life without fear. Don't you understand? I can't give her that now!"

"How do you know what she wants?" Harry challenged stubbornly. "She's been gone ten years and I don't see any other husband or kids floating around." Remus winced and Harry pushed on. "Look, forget the past — what about *right now*? You can take precautions can't you? Merlin, she can leave the country twelve times a year if you want her to!"

All at once, Remus was on his feet, towering over Harry.

"Don't you think I know that?" he shot suddenly and heatedly. "Don't you think that thought hasn't been torturing me ever since she arrived — ever since we broke up? No matter what, there's the prophecy to consider — I *will* bite her!"

Harry gritted his teeth. *That bloody Trelawney!*

"Then why wait?" he snapped, standing up to the man. "Just go ahead and bite her and get it over with! Why bother being miserable all your lives if you know you're going to bite her anyway? What are you gonna do? Are you planning on waiting until you're both dying of old age then you'll — what — *gum* her to death!"

"Harry ..." murmured Remus.

"Don't '*Harry*' me!" shot the green-eyed lad fiercely, bruising for a fight. "Do you love her or not?"

Remus growled in frustration, "Of course, I love her!"

"And you trust her?"

"Yes," bit Remus tightly.

"Then why aren't you letting *her* decide how she lives her life?"

Remus and Harry glared at each other, neither of them willing to back down. Harry's flare of anger had passed immediately, leaving only painful empathy and frustration for a man who'd become as much a father to him as he had ever known.

"Out of the mouths of babes," murmured Aphrodite dreamily. Startled, both Harry and Remus looked up at the Marble. Smiling enigmatically, she added, "You cannot choose another's path in love." She touched her golden apple to her lips and added, "Even the gods find it hard to love and be wise at the same time."

Slowly, Harry felt Remus's emotions settling back down. And there was a new emotion — small but unmistakable — hope. The ghost of a smile appeared in Remus's eyes and travelled slowly to the corners of his mouth.

"Good luck," whispered Aphrodite, blowing them each a kiss.

Remus bowed deeply to Aphrodite, and Harry self-consciously did so as well. He wasn't altogether sure what had just happened, but he could tell that Remus had come to some kind of decision.

"Moony," he ventured as they walked back to the White Villa, "you said there was a second part to your prophecy ..."

Remus sighed deeply and shook his head. "I didn't tell her ... I couldn't, it's too ..."

Remus's shudder infected Harry with one of his own and left him wondering what could be even worse than being bitten by a werewolf. Perhaps in an effort to cheer him, Remus slung an arm around Harry's shoulder and gave him a one-armed hug.

"But you know what?" he said with a small but genuine smile. "I think you just might have helped me with that part of it as well."

"Does that mean you and Elizabeth will get back together?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I don't know, Harry," Remus said wistfully. "I caused a lot of damage. And I only seem to be making things worse of late ... I just don't know if I can ever win back her trust after everything that's happened. But you're right about one thing," he said firmly, walking a bit taller, "it's high time I gave her a proper choice." Remus couldn't help but smile at the look of triumph on Harry's face. "I'm not going to hope for miracles, Harry," he said evenly, "but who knows, I may yet be able to persuade her to let me have some small part of her heart again. I — I've missed her so."

The pair continued slowly up the path, Remus still with one arm slung affectionately about his boy's shoulders. As they neared the villa, they could see Elizabeth waving to them from the wrought-iron railing, her hands full of shopping bags. Remus and Harry smiled and waved back.

"Gum her to death, eh?" Remus murmured wryly. "I've heard worse plans."

Back down on the beach, more suitably attired in sandals and long, lairy-coloured surf shorts, Remus carefully sniffed the slimy weed that Harry collected earlier.

"Smells like Gillyweed ..." he agreed. Elizabeth came closer and confirmed it.

"It's safe enough raw," she said, "but you really want to dry it out then steep it in a Venus Solution for a few days for the best results."

Harry's face fell. He wasn't that good a swimmer and he didn't want to admit to being a bit apprehensive about wading out into the sea without a few fins, gills, and flippers.

"But we can collect some more for later, if you like," said Elizabeth encouragingly, handing him goggles and a snorkel. "It grows in the rock pools."

Remus managed to insert Harry's glasses into the goggles and soon the three of them were snorkelling around the rock-pool end of the beach, collecting Gillyweed and discovering a wide variety of marine life in the crystal clear waters. When they found a nest of long-legged, plump Plimpies, Remus gave Harry an impromptu magical-creatures lesson. Harry was more excited when he found a black and white sea-snail and raced off to show it to Elizabeth. His godmother (by now reclining sleepily on a sunny boulder with their collection of Gillyweed) was also amazed by Harry's find, although by the time Harry had collected his fifth sea-snail he kind of twigged she was just being kind. He didn't mind, though; mucking around at the beach was too good a novelty to care about how dumb he looked.

"This place is just amazing," Harry said happily when they were drying off on the beach. There was something about the island, something powerfully good, magical. He glanced at his moodstone wristband and wasn't at all surprised to see a brilliant green.

"Moony," he said, "how come Sirius didn't bring you here, too, when you were kids?"

Remus towelled his hair, shaking out sand. "We never really saw too much of each other in the holidays. Our families didn't exactly socialise. At first I was too scared they'd discover my secret. And my parents were pretty protective; they always wanted me at home with them. I don't really remember Sirius talking about beach holidays when we were older."

"No," agreed Elizabeth wryly, as she neatly refolded her towel, "he became much more interested in monster trucks and motorbikes than swimming and snorkelling. And I pretty much stopped coming here, too, after Alphard died. It just wasn't the same. It can be a bit lonely here on

your own."

Harry shook his head in wonder as he tried to wriggle his glasses back out of his goggles. "I'd have come here every chance I got."

Elizabeth smiled softly. "Sirius went through this big rebellious stage when he was about your age; he moved out of home as soon as he could, and he was never too keen on going back there to use the grandfather clock. Sirius and his parents ... well, let's just say they didn't quite see eye to eye on a few things." Harry snorted derisively. Elizabeth pretended not to notice. "And you must remember," she said, mildly reproachful, "we were at war at that stage; we had a few other things on our minds."

Harry's face fell. He'd scarcely given Voldemort a moment's thought all day.

"The war, right ..." he said heavily, squinting down the beach, "I almost forgot. I guess we should get back to it. Recon and stuff ..."

Elizabeth and Remus exchanged concerned looks.

"Harry, you've just been through a horrific ordeal," Elizabeth said firmly. "Both your body and your mind need a chance to recuperate."

Remus concurred. "Harry, the most important thing you can do right now is regain your strength. *That* is our number one priority."

Harry looked at their worried faces and smiled inwardly, a scathingly brilliant notion forming in his mind.

"I do still feel pretty weak ..." he said. This was actually true, though Harry knew it was nothing he couldn't handle. Remus's brow creased a little, but Elizabeth was nodding sympathetically. Harry turned doleful eyes on her and said, "But I know you need to be getting back home to Canada. You probably wouldn't want to stay and help me; you've got your job and everything ..."

"Harry, no!" Elizabeth blurted, pulling him into her arms. "Of course, I want to help you! I'll stay as long as you need me!"

Harry clung contentedly to his godmother's soft, warm body. "Here?" he asked hopefully over her shoulder. "On the island?"

Elizabeth drew back and tenderly cupped his cheeks in her hands.

"Of course, darling," she said soothingly. "I'll go right now and talk to the elves. We can stay all month if you like."

Then she looked uncertainly at Remus, who nodded very quickly. Her cheeks pinking, she Disapparated with a swish of her saffron sarong.

Smirking, Harry strolled casually away from his speechless guardian and said, "You so owe me."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 23 – Grand Inquisitions

On Saturday evening, 8th August, Professor Albus Dumbledore convened the inquest into Harry's accident in the war room at Order Headquarters. It had already been determined that no foul play had occurred, but that didn't excuse the near-fatal miscommunication and poor judgment exhibited by the three members who set up and activated the charms. One by one, they sat alone on one side of the long mahogany dining table to face a panel of Harry's choosing: his guardian, his headmaster, and his godmother. Harry sat to Remus's left, watchful and, for the most part, silent.

Mundungus Fletcher went first, and it didn't take long for the panel to determine that, however incompetent he was, he had genuinely believed he was doing the right thing at the time. A distraught Mad-Eye Moody was interviewed next, claiming all the blame and practically begging to be kicked out of the Order. The panel declined.

The feelings in the room with Dung and Moody had been sober, apologetic, and respectful. Harry dearly hoped things were about to improve.

Severus Snape swept into the war room and twirled to close the double doors, his black robes billowing. You are so going to get it, Harry thought contentedly. Snape's beady eyes narrowed at Harry's smile, and then he proceeded to studiously ignore him. He sat back in his chair with his arms crossed, sleekly answering the panel's questions. He explained the charms he'd used and confirmed the timeline of events and decisions advanced by Dung and Moody. It was all going depressingly well until Remus questioned him on the choice of panic room.

"You could have used any room in the house," Remus observed. "Why did you choose that particular cupboard?"

"There was a ready water source to freeze for masking the boy's body heat," Snape replied smoothly.

Remus's eyes narrowed. "You could have found another way to achieve the same result."

"I was told timing was an issue," countered Snape.

"That's not why," Harry said coldly. "You wanted to punish me."

"Don't be ridiculous," Snape sniffed, not even looking at him.

"Punish you for what, Harry?" Elizabeth asked, leaning forward to look past Dumbledore and Remus.

"Madam Ramsay," Snape started in an oily voice, "you should understand that —"

"It's Mrs Lupin, Mr Snape," Elizabeth said cuttingly.

"Mrs *Lupin* then," he said softly, his lips curling unpleasantly around the word. "You need to know that the boy routinely sees conspiracies at every turn —"

"Yeah?" Harry cut in irately. Red sparks flashed in his moodstone. "Well, you'll forgive me if I'm starting to feel like people want me dead!"

"Harry," Remus said warningly before turning back to Snape. "Speed may have been a factor, but you might just as easily have used the pantry and the old ice chest to the same effect."

"Exactly!" Elizabeth snapped bitterly. "Instead, you summoned him into that rat-infested den of his godfather's betrayer!"

Snape stiffened but said nothing.

"Yeah!" Harry said unnecessarily, feeling a rush of gratitude for his godmother.

Snape's eyes whipped between the panel members then settled on Remus — and Harry. The depth of loathing radiating from the man almost pushed Harry back in his seat. Remus wasn't feeling too chirpy about Snape, either, but he was doing a better job of hiding it.

"Why Kreacher's den?" Remus repeated coolly.

"I've already answered your question. I'm not going to —"

"It's because I saw that memory, isn't it?" Harry said, cutting across him. "That's what this is all about. Well, I'm sorry I saw what I did. Believe me, I wish I hadn't. *I'm sorry, all right!* But you've had it in for me since my first day at school. Eleven years old and minding my own business! What had I done to you then?"

"The boy is *clearly* delusional," Snape said indifferently. "I've saved his overrated neck more times than —"

"Or maybe it's just that I *exist*?" Harry shot nastily.

Snape's sallow fingers curled menacingly. Harry was confident those fingers ached to be closing around his neck.

"Answer the question, Snape," Remus said severely. "Did you choose Kreacher's den as some kind of twisted punishment?"

Snape's lips retracted over yellowing teeth. "I might have known the boy would find a new champion amongst his father's cronies."

"Your answer, Mr Snape?" Elizabeth bit with frigid politeness. Harry could tell she was angry enough to leap across the table and rip out his beady black eyes. Snape stiffened and his gaze sneaked to where his wand lay immobile on the table before Professor Dumbledore.

"No," said Snape.

"You're lying," Harry stated emphatically. "You wanted to teach me a lesson!"

Snape's eyes glinted dangerously, his knuckles white over clenched fists; Harry could tell he was close to losing it.

"I refuse to sit here —" Snape started.

"Didn't you!" snapped Harry.

"— while this *arrogant* —"

"*DIDN'T YOU!*" Harry was on his feet, shaking off the hands trying to pull him back down.

"— *puffed up, pampered little prince* —"

"*ANSWER ME!*" roared Harry. Snape was suddenly on his feet, too, his chair upturned and his lips shaking with rage and spittle.

"— *stands there and* —"

"*You wanted to get me back!*"

"*YOU DESERVED IT!*"

A hush fell over the room. Snape, his nostrils flaring, his breathing ragged, belatedly realised what he had just admitted. Feelings of anger, shock, and revulsion were washing over all three interrogators, but Harry's rage fell sharply away. He smiled slightly, knowing that he'd won, knowing he was right and that everyone knew he was right.

"That wasn't so hard, now was it?" he said coolly into the deathly quiet room. Snape's thin lips shook in silent fury; Harry's moodstone had gone an ice-blue. "I'd say you've made your point," he continued, savouring the moment. "I see a memory of something my *father* did to you *twenty* years ago, and *you* create a Summoning Charm so *flawed* and a panic room so *foul* that I literally get burned to death!" Harry's voice dripped with sarcasm. "I reckon we just might be even by now, don't you think?"

Snape seemed to shrink, though he stood as rigid as ever. A slightly confused look flickered in his eyes but was gone so fast Harry felt sure he must have imagined it and the sneer was firmly back in place. Remus was suddenly on his feet and made to vault across the table, but Harry and Dumbledore each grabbed an arm and held him back. No one was holding Elizabeth. She was but a blonde blur as she vaulted the table and stabbed her fingernails into Snape's face. They crashed to the floor in a jumble of arms and legs.

"*Dissendium!*" roared Dumbledore.

Even as Elizabeth went tumbling to safety, Remus broke free and Snape was under attack again. Although Dumbledore quickly separated the two men, Harry was certain he detected just a whiff of envy when Remus gave Snape a very bloody nose.

Within moments, Dumbledore had a handful of wands and three former students silenced, tied up with ropes, and pinned like living portraits on different walls. Although a tad bloody, no one seemed seriously hurt. Harry, however, found himself clutching the table dizzily as the violent emotions he'd been holding at bay rolled over him from three directions at once. Dumbledore lent him a steady hand. Harry glanced anxiously up and down the room and shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

"They'll be fine," promised Dumbledore, ignoring the 'portraits' straining furiously against their ropes. He led Harry around the table and out the door. "Do feel free to chat amongst yourselves," he invited archly over his shoulder. He released the Silencing Charm and firmly locked the door behind him.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" Harry asked anxiously.

"I do," Dumbledore said serenely. "Those three need to get a few things off their chests. And to be quite frank, my dear boy, I can't think of a safer way to let that happen. Too many things have been let fester for far too long."

Still woozy, Harry gripped the banister for support.

"Here, sit a moment," said Dumbledore. Harry felt for the steps and sat down. Dumbledore joined him, sweeping his abundant robes across Harry's legs to warm him. "Are you all right?" he asked kindly.

"No," Harry muttered in frustration. "Why do you trust him?! I mean, he just straight out *lied* to you!"

Dumbledore exhaled a deep sigh. "Harry, are you familiar with the adage 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'? No? You see, Harry, Professor Snape knows he will never be truly free whilst ever Voldemort is at large. To put it simply, he will do whatever it takes to ensure Voldemort is finally and comprehensively vanquished. It is in his best interests to see that any plans to defeat Voldemort succeed. Harry, I trust Professor Snape because we share that common goal."

"He might be *your* friend," Harry protested bitterly, "but he does everything he can to make *my* life a living hell. And Sirius's, too! Always goading him, trying to get him riled up. Accusing him of being a coward. And all that messing about the day I got that fake vision. He gave me every reason not to trust him, or I might have gone straight to him instead of getting caught by Umbridge. Sirius would be alive today if—"

"Harry, you cannot know that," Dumbledore protested gently. "But much of what you say is true," he conceded grimly. "And rest assured I shall be seriously reprimanding Professor Snape for his behaviour, both as revealed this evening and in other circumstances. Harry, I must impress upon you the gravity and delicacy of the situation. Every creature is at its most dangerous when its circumstances become desperate. I do fear what may happen if the man was to be forced out of the Order — out of Hogwarts, even. And yet I must weigh this against your own safety and well-being. Harry, I want to ask you to trust me to deal with Professor Snape, even though you have every reason not to."

Harry stared into Dumbledore's familiar blue eyes, this venerable old wizard who only two months earlier rescued him from Voldemort and saved Hermione and Ron and the others as well.

"I died," he grumbled bitterly, though he could feel the fight leaking out of him. "How much worse does it have to get?"

"Changes will be made," Dumbledore assured him evenly. "Might I suggest a written apology and also a period of probation? On your return to school, if Professor Snape's attitude has not materially improved by, say, Halloween, then we could talk again and decide if greater intervention is required."

Harry knew he was being manipulated, but he gave the proposal serious consideration. Kicking Snape out of the Order would've been immensely satisfying, but the idea of the Great Bat having to rely on one Harry James Potter to give him a good report card was just too, too delicious to resist.

"Thank you, Harry," said Professor Dumbledore quietly. "Come," he said more brightly, helping him to his feet. "Some hot chocolate, I think. I find it always perks me up."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Curled in a ball in her bed in the Leaky Cauldron Inn, cocooned like a silkworm, safe and warm, Elizabeth was nowhere near ready to wake up.

Tap. Tap.

"Go away," she whimpered, burrowing deeper inside her fluffy white quilt.

Evil miaowed. Elizabeth felt him leap off the bed and heard him scratching eagerly at the door.

Shit! Remus!

Evil kept scratching and miaowing. Elizabeth stayed perfectly still, hoping he'd give up. She didn't need to check a mirror to know she was in *no* condition to receive anyone, least of all Remus. It wasn't fair! The boys were supposed to be off at some Quidditch game — she was supposed to have the *whole* day to herself!

"Auntie Lizzie?" called a girl's voice.

Elizabeth froze in shock — then relief — then shock again. She shoved the covers off her face and fumbled for her wand.

"*Alohomora!*" she cried blearily.

The door clicked open and Natalie screamed and tumbled joyfully into the room, tripping over Evil, leaping onto the bed, and smothering her aunt in hugs and kisses.

"God, it's freezing in here," she declared, kicking off her shoes and diving under the quilt. "Oooh, you're so warm! Why do you always keep it so cold in your room?"

"Um ..." Elizabeth said, blinking dazedly as Natalie snuggled up to her and fired off a stream of questions and declarations about everything and anything.

"Why haven't you answered your WizChat? We got in last night and they said you were in this room, but you were out. How's Harry? Ron says he's out of hospital. What's all this about Uncle Remus? Are you two getting back together or what? Dad's taking me to see the Harpies! I was so surprised when he pulled out the tickets! I can't wait! Ron says he knows Gwenog Jones! But I don't know if he's just being — you know. He's going, too — with Harry and their friends — but you probably already know all about that. I didn't tell him I was coming — he's going to be so shocked when he sees me! Wow, you look terrible! Those mountain trolls must have been really horrible!"

Elizabeth choked a laugh. She closed her eyes and twisted her niece around to spoon cosily behind her.

"Auntie Lizzie needs her beauty sleep, precious," she pleaded, "... *desperately*."

Natalie snuggled into her then gasped and grabbed Elizabeth's hand. "WHAT have you done to your fingernails?"

Elizabeth was saved responding by another tap on the door.

"That'll be Dad," Natalie said cheerily, jumping up before Elizabeth could stop her.

Elizabeth made a token effort to smooth her hair but then gave up, finding herself beyond caring at this point — especially considering the testiness of their last Doodles. Julius, she knew, would be standing outside her door straight-backed and immaculately groomed, his sleek blonde hair tied at his nape with the slim red bow of a Wizarding Advocate, but he chose to stay in the hallway and relay via Natalie a request for a 'private chat' with his sister after breakfast.

"Why not," Elizabeth said fatalistically to Natalie. "Be a dear and have them send up a tray?"

"You look awful," Julius declared bluntly, sweeping into her room half an hour later.

"Nice to see you, too, Jules," said Elizabeth sourly. Things did not improve as their 'private chat' progressed. "You knew and you didn't tell me!" she shot angrily, having just discovered that her brother knew about Remus's outing by the *Daily Prophet* two years before.

"What if I did?" Julius snapped defiantly. "Can you honestly tell me you haven't wasted ten of the best years of your life pining over that — that —"

"Remus is the finest *man* I have ever known!" Elizabeth cut in furiously.

"I was going to say wife-deserter!"

"Don't even start with me today, Julius," she said darkly, straining to resist the urge to slap him.

"Elizabeth, you must concede by now that this marriage was doomed from the start. The marriage contract alone took *six* lawyers three months to prepare —"

"Oh yes," she cut across him, "you were all so insistent that Remus could only be after me for my money that you made the marriage bond unbreakable for as long as we both loved each other." Julius lifted his chin defiantly. Elizabeth laughed bitterly and shook her head. "Don't think I don't know you've been trying to find a loophole in your legal masterpiece for the last ten years. Remy would've given me a divorce and walked away without asking for a Sickle years ago if not for your iron-fisted love bind!"

"I was trying to protect you!" Julius shot heatedly.

"You were trying to control my life!"

Brother and sister exchanged mutinous glares. Though ten years apart, they could have been mistaken for twins, both possessing wide-set blue eyes, Nordic blonde looks, and stubborn jaws. The longer Elizabeth stood there, being all self-righteous, the less she wanted to be; she knew Julius only wanted what was best for her. He'd always been deeply protective of his baby sister. When she fled England for Canada, he had packed up his wife, his law practice, his young children, and followed her. Standing now in an anonymous bedchamber in London, Julius Ramsay, so commanding in a courtroom, didn't want to fight either. Spinning around in frustration, he sat with a thud on the bed, inspiring a dozen inflations of her puffy quilt.

"What are you doing here, Lizzie?" he asked fitfully. "And don't give me some cock-and-bull story about Harry bloody Potter, or civil war, or fighting the good fight."

She sank beside him and slipped her hand in his, willing him to understand.

"I love him, Jules," she said thickly. "I need him. I found my soul mate once. Without him, I'm only half the person I could be."

Julius inspected her hand, taking a good look at her knuckles and nails, which were not in the best state.

"You want him back," he told her hand. It wasn't a question. A sob caught in Elizabeth's throat and she nodded. Julius lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them, then exhaled a resigned sigh and said, "What can your big brother do to help?"

Tears dribbled down Elizabeth's cheeks. Never before — never in ten years — had her brother ever tried to understand. She threw her arms around his neck and everything came spilling out: Remus, the prophecy, the Black Forest, the heartbreaking agreement they'd made to go their separate ways, of surrendering all ties of fidelity, of there being a new, younger woman in his life ...

Julius was deeply shocked, not least of which because Elizabeth had withheld her painful secret for ten long years.

"You could have come to me," he reprimanded her huskily. Elizabeth had no answer to that; she just hiccupped helplessly as Julius carefully dried her tears with his fine cotton handkerchief. "Divination's a lot of superstitious nonsense, if you ask me," he declared stoutly. "In any case, once a month we can work with. I'll chain him up myself if I have to! As for this other woman — she can't be a patch on my Lizzie, now, can she?" Julius's lips twisted as he looked his sister up and down appraisingly. "Well," he conceded wryly, "maybe today she could."

Harry was in the drawing room with his guitar and Susan Bones's *Fretful Favourites*, trying to learn something beyond *Greensleeves*, when Bill Weasley knocked on the open door. Harry checked the grandfather clock; they weren't due to leave for the Holyhead Harpies / Puddlemere United Quidditch match until three o'clock.

"Hi," he said, smiling. "Bit early aren't you?"

"Remus asked me to poke around in your brain to see if you're completely nuts yet." Harry laughed at that, appreciating that at least Bill was

honest about it. "And I thought you might be missing this little guy." From behind his back, Bill revealed a saggy old basket.

"Are we there yet?" hissed a dozy voice.

"Frank!" Harry cried, setting down his guitar and loping across the room. Frank's head popped out of the basket, and he joyfully slithered into Harry's arms and started telling him all about his adventures in the Bones' household. Harry tried to keep up as Bill started talking over Frank's excited hisses.

"Susan dropped him over this morning," said Bill. "She thought he might get a bit rattled by the crowds at the match."

"Did you miss me?" Harry cooed to Frank, finding his snakehead and pulling it up to rub against his cheek.

"Oh, immeasurably, dear boy," Frank assured him.

"Liar," Harry said. Frank chuckled softly.

Bill nodded to the *Sunday Prophet* spread across the coffee table and said teasingly, "Saw the article about you and Cho. 'Saved by the power of love' and all that. Had Mum and Ginny in tears." Harry groaned deeply. As usual, the paper had taken a great many liberties with the truth and concocted some fairytale about Cho being the love of his life. Bill looked around casually and added, "I thought I might find her here."

"I think she's had enough of me for awhile," Harry said, forcing a laugh.

Bill said nothing to that. Instead, he tossed Harry a bottle of Butterbeer, which Harry accepted gratefully, and they sat and chatted about music, Goblin politics, Egyptian curses ... everything and nothing, really. Frank got comfortable stretched across the back of the couch, adding his two cents now and then between verses of *Have You Met Miss Bones*. Harry found it so easy to talk to Bill; he was full of useful tips and trivia; he even gave him another guitar lesson, but called a halt when Harry's new fingertips grew too red and sore.

"Don't worry," Bill said easily, "they'll callous up nicely in no time." His gaze drifted to the newspaper again. "So," he said delicately, "how are things going with Cho?"

"Not fabulous," Harry conceded.

Bill frowned deeply and Frank sucked in an excited breath; neither of them had been too impressed with Cho's antics during the party weekend.

"Must have been a hard week on both of you," Bill noted. "Has she been keeping her word? You know, not bringing up the past?"

"Not exactly," Harry said slowly, "but it's not her fault — you can't help what's in your dreams ..."

"And it keeps spilling onto you," Bill suggested, wearing a look of disapproval that would have done his mother proud.

"I guess," Harry said uneasily; Bill couldn't know it was actually him, Harry, who had badly messed with Cho's head, not the other way around. "But see," he argued in his defence, "I already lost her twice this year — I don't fancy going through that again."

"Not much of a reason to stay together," Bill observed shrewdly.

"*Listen to Bill!*" hissed a desperate voice in Harry's ear. Harry ignored his python; Frank had never been too fond of Cho.

"You have seen Cho Chang, haven't you?" he challenged Bill.

Bill chuckled and said, "So, what else do you fancy about her?"

Harry slumped back in his seat and regarded the ceiling. "Well ... she's smart ... and she's got a wicked sense of humour ... and I like that she's into Quidditch ... and she fancies me a lot —" Harry stopped, suddenly realising how big-headed that sounded, and tried to backtrack, "I mean, no — I ..." but Bill was clearly amused. "Shut up," laughed Harry.

"I seem to recall *Ginny* used to have quite a crush on you," teased Bill.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't remind me. I'm still trying to live down being crash-tackled by that singing Valentine dwarf she sicked on me."

Harry suddenly realised who he was talking to, but Bill didn't seem offended; he just drew a long swig from his bottle. Harry did the same, recalling how Ginny hadn't even *known* him — she'd just seen him, or heard his name or something — and got a crush on him. But then again, prompted an honest voice inside his head, hadn't he felt like that about *Cho* when he first saw her? He hadn't really known her either.

"So, are you in love with Cho?" Bill asked, straight to the point.

Harry almost spat out his Butterbeer. He swiped at his lips and was ready to laugh off the question, but something held him back. He could ask Bill.

"How do you even know?" he asked very seriously.

"You'll know," Bill said confidently. "You'll know in your gut. You'll get this — I don't know — this warm feeling — this feeling that ..."

Bill paused in search of something that Harry dearly hoped was better than a sick feeling in your stomach (he already knew all about that).

"For one thing, you can hardly stop thinking about her," Bill said distantly (smiling a trifle dopily in Harry's opinion). "She'll drive you nuts, but when you see something funny or beautiful, your first thought is to wish she were there to see it, too. And you'll end up doing and saying the daftest things — but you won't care one little bit. And the minute she's gone home, you're already planning how fast you can see her again. And you're desperate," said Bill, on a roll now. "You know full-well she's too good for you and you're scared as hell she's going to find out before you've made yourself worthy of her. And you don't know whether you feel sick or wonderful half the time, but when she tells you she loves you ... well, you'll want to shout it from the rooftops."

Harry stared blankly at the man. "Rooftops. Right," he said, nodding numbly. "Okay then. Good to know."

Bill's blue eyes twinkled with amusement. "There's nothing wrong with just *fancying* a girl, you know. Especially at your age — perfect time of life to try on different crushes. Things get a lot messier as you get older."

Harry blew out his cheeks; love was not nearly as much fun as he'd hoped it would be.

"I don't *think* I'm in love with her," he said honestly. "I can't see myself shouting her name from the rooftops, anyway. But, I dunno ... she was really good when I was sick — helping me in hospital and all ..."

"Tricky," Bill conceded fairly.

"What do you think I should do?"

Bill took a lingering sip of Butterbeer before answering. "Look, don't get me wrong, you don't need to be *madly* in love with every girl you ever go out with, but in Cho's case ..." Bill hesitated again. "Look, it's your business, but I think with Cho you need to ask yourself whether the good outweighs the grief."

Harry pondered that. For about three seconds. "No."

"YES!" Frank hissed joyfully and fell off the back of the couch, landing with a great thud. Undeterred, he raced under the couch and up Bill's legs. "I always knew I liked you!" he told him earnestly.

"What's he saying?" Bill asked curiously.

"He's telling me to listen to you," Harry said, swiping playfully at Frank's excitedly quivering tail. "He *really* likes you right now."

"Why thank you, Frank," said Bill.

"Not at all," Frank hissed graciously.

Turning his attention back to Harry, Bill said delicately, "I think you probably know what you need to do about Cho."

Harry groaned deeply at the prospect. "How do you break up with someone?"

Bill's lips twitched; Harry suspected he was enjoying this far too much.

"I thought you'd already broken up a couple of times already," Bill said. "You should be pretty good at it by now."

"Yeah, well," countered Harry, "yelling at each other in a public place always seems to do the trick."

"See," Bill said cheekily, opening his arms wide, "already sorted. Big game this afternoon — huge crowd of spectators — could be as many as two thousand people if you feel like putting on a show."

"Shut up," laughed Harry. "This is serious!" But he was already feeling lighter and happier having finally made the decision to break it off with Cho. His bright-green moodstone was certainly of the opinion he'd made the right choice. "So, what do you think?" he said, rubbing his chin and launching into battle mode. "Before the game? After? The hardest part'll be getting her away from everyone ..."

"That won't be the hardest part," Bill said knowingly. "The hardest part'll be figuring out what to say."

"That's quite true," Frank said wisely. Harry's moodstone suddenly turned a decidedly dirty brown.

Bill spilled Frank onto the couch, slapped a hand on Harry's knee and pushed off. "Meet me on the roof in fifteen minutes and we'll get going. See you, Frank."

"Hang on!" Harry blurted, jumping up. "What am I gonna say? You can't just —"

"You'll figure it out," Bill said easily. "Just be nice to her. And truthful — but not *too* truthful. Roof — three o'clock."

And then he was gone, leaving Harry standing in open-mouthed horror of the task before him.

"Do you think you could hold still for *one* minute?" Remus said exasperatedly as he tried for the third time to cast concealment charms over his ward.

"What? Oh, sorry," mumbled Harry, standing still and glaring across the rooftop at Bill, who was failing to hide a smile. Harry kept glaring at him anyway. Whose brilliant idea was this anyway?

The Holyhead Harpies/Puddlemere United match was being staged that day within a reasonable flying distance of London (about an hour in the direction of Kent) and so Harry, Remus and Bill were flying down and would be meeting up with everyone down there. And Cho. Harry's stomach felt sick as he tried to work out what he was going to say to her. Every idea he came up with seemed worse than the last.

Sorry, I like you and all; I just don't want to go out with you any more.

Sorry, I don't want you any more, no hard feelings.

Sorry, but you drive me nuts. You're really pretty, though.

Just be nice to her, Bill said. *Ha!* Easy for him to say — nothing Harry could think of even came close!

The threesome finally got going. As Harry soared through the clouds, his anxiety fell away, replaced instead by the sheer exhilaration of flying on a beautiful summer's day. The time passed far too quickly, and soon Remus was bringing them down into what at first looked like a construction site for a sprawling Muggle shopping mall. Harry quickly learned the shopping mall was just an illusion for the Muggles, and they'd actually landed amongst colourful tents and souvenir stalls surrounding a regulation-sized Quidditch pitch.

It took little effort to find the Weasleys amongst the milling spectators, but neither did it take long for the Boy-Who-Lived to be noticed. Curious well-wishers were soon waving and calling out to him. Thoroughly rattled, Harry spent the greater part of his energy just keeping his mental shields up in order to try to cope with the overexcited crowds.

When Harry found Cho, she swiftly slid her hand in his and kissed his cheek, but she seemed pretty thrown by the crowd interest, too. Cries of 'don't they look lovely' and 'isn't she pretty' followed them around. There were also a few not-so-friendly voices but no one willing to stick around and show their face. Harry and Cho's friends surrounded them, sheltering them from the worst of it, but Fred and George had it all sorted. They briskly led the growing Potter party down to the blue and gold striped Puddlemere United tent, where Oliver Wood and Viktor Krum warmly welcomed them all. While his friends were scoring autographs and photos, Harry fell back and tried to clear his head.

Cho drew him aside to whisper worriedly, "Are you okay?"

"No, it's fine," Harry assured her. "I just ... I'm just a bit tired from the flight down."

"Do you want to go find our seats?" she suggested.

Harry nodded and they made to leave, but just then the tent exploded in a riot of hot-pink. The Harpies had arrived.

The seven Holyhead Harpies, captained by Gwenog Jones, strode towards the blue and gold Puddlemere United team. The PU team had several women, but the Harpies were a class apart. Each Amazon's hair was a mass of fine braids charmed to wriggle and writhe in the air like snakes, and they wore sleeveless black robes with hot-pink capes billowing majestically from their shoulders in a fabric that rippled and whirled, as if alive. Tall, toned, and tanned, they looked like they'd just stepped straight from some ancient Amazonian battle scene, each of them radiating an air of power and confidence that made Harry's skin prickle with excitement. The two teams greeted each other with bruising handshakes, and the DA watched on in awe as the players traded escalating insults as to the opposition's chances of victory. Harry could tell it was all for show, although Oliver, in particular, was taking it all extremely seriously. Gwenog was just thundering at a secretly amused Krum that he better take a photo now to send to his mother because he wouldn't be recognisable by the end of the match, when she stopped herself. She spun around, her hot-pink cape slapping at Oliver's face, on spotting — "HARRY!"

Horrified, Harry watched all seven Harpies shriek as one and fly towards him. The warrior women vanished, melting instead into seven doting doves, smothering Harry with hugs and kisses. Harry very nearly passed out which only made the Harpies fuss even more protectively over him and Cho.

"We're going to win this one for you, Harry!" Gwenog promised him. "RIGHT, GIRLS?"

"FOR HARRY POTTER!" roared the Harpies, pumping their Firebolts high into the air. All seven loosed a passionate Harpies' Howler that violently shook the PU tent (Harry knew this because he was gripping a tent pole for dear life at the time). And then they were gone in a blaze of hot-pink glory. The PU team looked around at each other in dismay, but it was the expression on Oliver's face that made Harry break out in a cold sweat.

I am so dead.

It was the worst defeat that Puddlemere United had suffered in 178 years. Natalie Ramsay was as ecstatic as her PU-supporter father was miserable. Not only had the Harpies performed absolutely brilliantly, but they'd also donated their prize money to Saint Mungo's Hospital in honour of their inspiring young hero, Harry Potter. And even better, the announcer had made Harry stand up, and Natalie was finally able to spot where he and Ron were sitting.

Natalie trained her Omnioculars on Harry's group. There was Cho sitting next to him. Harry looked very pale and a bit wobbly as he sat back down. He dropped his head into his hands, and Cho started rubbing his back as the crowd roared and cheered for him. Natalie supposed he must still feel pretty sick. Zooming in on the boy to Harry's left, Natalie's heart did a little flip on wondering if she was looking at Big Red.

She and Ron had been corresponding practically non-stop for the last four days. She found him so easy to talk to. He had none of the airs and graces of the French-Canadian boys she was used to. And he made her laugh so hard sometimes she couldn't even write properly. She took a good look at him now. He seemed tall and he definitely had red hair, at least that much was true. He was very freckled and had — Natalie zoomed in closer — clear blue eyes, long nose ... Ron smiled at something and Natalie's lips twisted upwards as well. He had a lovely smile!

Natalie suddenly realised her father's Omnioculars were also pointing in Ron's direction and she jumped guiltily, but then she remembered her father knew nothing about him. Looking closer, she found his target some three or four rows above Harry: Uncle Remus. He was older, of course, a bit greyer than she would've thought, thinner than he looked in her photo album, but it was definitely him. She remembered her Dad telling her once that he and Uncle Remus used to go to Puddlemere United games together years ago; she imagined that neither of them was too thrilled with the thrashing the Harpies had given their team today.

"Dad," Natalie said in her most endearing-daughter voice, for she knew how much her father disliked her uncle, "is it okay if I go and say hi to Harry?"

Natalie was shocked when her father immediately agreed and pulled his tiny owl, Rocket, from a pocket of his robes. Natalie sneaked a look over his shoulder as he wrote '178 years!' on the reverse of his business card. Rocket flew off with the card in his beak, Natalie eagerly tracking his progress with her Omnioculars.

She saw Uncle Remus catch the tiny owl in his lap and frown thoughtfully when he read the card. Then he turned it over and smiled slowly. He read both sides a couple of times then squinted into the stands, trying to spot the sender. Finally pocketing the card, he penned a brief note in return. He watched carefully to see where the owl went, but the air was thick with spectators zooming off on their brooms, and Rocket was quickly lost to view. Natalie tried to grab the note on his return, but the tiny owl was having none of that and stayed well out of her reach. Her father read the note and smiled to himself before turning to his daughter to say, "How would you like to meet the Harpies?"

Harry supposed he should have foreseen the crowd's affect on him, but he hadn't expected *anything* like this. The whole three-hour game had been pure agony for him. He didn't want to admit it to anyone, but he'd barely watched the match; he'd spent most of the time trying in vain to escape the thundering emotions whipping all around him. Elizabeth's exercises had helped a bit — just enough for him to hide the worst of how much it was affecting him. Right now, Harry was dead keen to just go home, go anywhere that didn't have thousands of people screaming and cheering and *feeling* all around him. Fortunately, as soon as the bulk of the crowds disappeared, Harry began to feel more like himself again, as if someone had suddenly turned off very loud music. Cho was happier, too, when she saw him getting some colour back in his face.

Their party had been invited to go down to the Harpies' tent and Remus mentioned that Elizabeth's brother might be meeting them.

"Would that be *Natalie* Ramsay's father?" Cho asked curiously.

"Yes, actually," replied Remus, surprised. "How do you know Natalie?"

"Oh, Harry — he introduced us in Diagon Alley," explained Cho. "We met when Harry was showing Natalie around."

Remus looked like he was trying to get his head around that. It wasn't working.

"Natalie was your date?" he asked Harry.

Harry groaned in frustration and Cho giggled sympathetically.

Ron's ears picked up. "What about Natalie?"

"All I did was show her around the shops!" moaned Harry. "That's it!"

Remus looked unconvinced.

"What *about* Natalie?" Ron persisted.

"Her father's here," Cho offered helpfully.

Ron's face lit up. "Is *she* here, too?"

Remus's frown deepened. "And how do *you* know Natalie?"

Harry answered for him. "Pen pals."

Remus just shook his head — it was all clearly beyond him.

As they neared the Harpies' pink and black striped victory tent, Harry grew worried, not fancying the prospect of being set upon again by all those adrenaline-pumped Amazons. He could sense Remus feeling nervous, as well, and wondered what kind of reception his guardian would be getting from Mr Ramsay after having 'abandoned' his sister all those years ago. Natalie said her dad was still dirty about it.

"Is that them?" Ron prompted, straining to see the entrance of the Harpies' tent.

Cho squinted through the crowd. "Ah — yes, that's Natalie. I guess that's her dad — I've never met him."

"Me either," noted Harry, looking curiously as well.

At first glance, Mr Ramsay, idly swinging a silver-topped cane, reminded Harry of Lucius Malfoy. He had smooth sandy blonde hair under his indigo pointed hat and looked casually elegant in a set of matching robes topped with a lemon cravat. As they drew closer, Harry saw Natalie excitedly grab her father's sleeve and whisper something. The man's face came alive with pleasure as he looked down at his smiling daughter. Harry breathed a sigh of relief; this was no Malfoy. Ron wasn't quick enough and Fred and George rushed forward to greet Natalie first. She laughed off their attempts to kiss her hands and kept looking over their shoulders towards Ron, who was shifting awkwardly from foot to foot and blushing scarlet under his frayed pointed hat. Fred and George didn't seem at all put off (either by Natalie, or by the sternly disapproving gaze of Mr Ramsay).

"George," Remus said mildly, "are you planning on detaching my niece's hand, too?"

George dropped Natalie's hand like a stone. "Er, we'll just be ..." The twins were off like a shot into the noisy tent, and most of the Potter party raced after them. Remus gamely offered his hand to his brother-in-law.

"Julius," he said calmly, though Harry knew how nervous he was.

"It's good to see you, Remus," Mr Ramsay said smoothly, firmly shaking Remus's hand. "It's been far too long."

Natalie's eyes widened in shock; Remus was just as taken aback but covered better.

"That it has," he agreed hoarsely.

Harry was deeply relieved for Remus; Mr Ramsay was guarded, certainly, but he did seem genuinely glad to see him.

"Hi, Uncle Remus," Natalie offered tentatively with a bit of a wave. Remus smiled softly and bowed low to the girl he'd not seen for ten years. Natalie smiled back shyly and sneaked grins to Harry and the others.

Five minutes of the boisterous victory party was more than enough for Harry. He stayed only long enough to congratulate the Harpies and smile weakly for the sports' photographer; then he fled, mumbling something about the toilet. Bill found him some while later sitting in the middle of the dark, deserted Quidditch pitch. The Curse Breaker shot something silvery from his wand in the direction of the Harpies' tent, and in that flash of light, Harry spotted Cho hovering in the background. Bill looked between the pair.

"I'll just be over — erm — I'll pop back in a bit."

Bill casually ambled off in the direction of the party tent, though Harry had no doubt the man would be maintaining close tabs on him; no one in the Order was too keen on letting the Boy-Who-Lived out of their sight for long.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Cho ventured worriedly.

Harry bristled. What kind of weakling did she think he was?

"Just fancied a bit of air," he mumbled.

Cho nodded and sat with him on the grass amongst the clover and wildflowers. They just sat there in the dark holding hands. Harry chided himself. What was he waiting for? They were all alone. The distant sounds of the Weird Sisters belting out from the victory tent gave them privacy from eavesdroppers. If he didn't do it now ...

"Listen, Cho ..." he started.

"Harry, I ..." said Cho at the same time. "Oh, sorry, no — you go first."

"No, you go," offered Harry, but Cho was shaking her head. Harry steeled himself for battle.

"Cho, I want you to know ... um. Look, I really appreciate how much you helped me in hospital — you were great, brilliant — um ... see ..." Harry struggled to remember his rehearsed speech. It had all flown out of his head the minute he looked into Cho's dark eyes. He found himself babbling. "Brilliant ... yeah — really — you know ... erm." He stopped and took a steady breath, trying hard to conjure an escape route from this mess. "Look, Cho, I'm not safe. Far from it. Thing is — I mean, things are going to keep happening to me — I'm on so many hit lists —"

Cho sucked in a breath. Her eyes welled with tears. Crap — not tears, thought Harry desperately. Focus! You can do this!

"Professor Dumbledore said Fate wasn't done with you," Cho agreed faintly, "but I never realised ..."

Harry pushed down the urge to wrap his arms around her. "Cho, listen, you've been *brilliant* — helping me and all — it's just ..."

"Harry, you're worth it," she said earnestly.

"No, I'm not!" Harry blurted desperately. "Truly, I'm not. Look, I can tell what all this is doing to you ..."

Cho's eyes sparkled with more tears. "I can handle it," she said tremulously.

Harry shook his head emphatically. "I don't *want* you to handle this stuff — it tears you up too much inside. And you heard Dumbledore's speech — it's only going to get worse. Cho, I'm not the one you want. I don't know any poetry and I'm not as big and brave as you seem to think." Harry

opened his arms wide and shook his head. "This is all there is, Cho. I'm not Cedric. I'm Harry, just Harry. Look," he pushed on frankly, "I have to wonder if we're really the best people for each other. There's just so much baggage —"

Harry broke off when Cho burst into tears. His spirits soared higher than the grandstand towers when he realised they were tears of relief. She started blubbering about not having wanted to say anything until he'd fully recovered. How she cared about him so much, but that it was all just too overwhelming for her to deal with. How her nightmares were back and they were worse than ever. How she hadn't slept properly for days for worrying about him. Harry stared dazedly at the raven-haired beauty — he couldn't believe his luck!

A soft thud hit Harry's leg; it was a box of tissues. Harry's heart was thumping hard as he wrapped Cho tightly in his arms and let her spill her tears and fears all over him. He fed her tissue after tissue and stammered that he understood and it was okay.

Snuffling, Cho looked up at him tragically and suggested that maybe it just wasn't meant to be. A voice inside Harry's head was screaming 'YES!', but he met Cho's tragic look and raised it with an even deeper tragic sigh and nod.

"I don't want to lose you," he said, adding hastily, "as a friend, I mean."

"Never," she promised him with shining eyes.

Harry exhaled a great sigh of relief. Cho beamed at him through the last of her tears and Harry risked a lop-sided smile.

"Tragic little pair, aren't we?" he offered, trying hard not to sound *too* happy.

Cho hugged him tightly. Very tightly.

"One last kiss?" she whispered huskily in his ear. Harry found himself extremely pleased to oblige.

Sitting there in the dark on the grass, the pair embraced and sank into the clover. Harry put everything he had into that last embrace, and as he passionately kissed and caressed Cho Chang, he loaded up his mind with every sensual thought or desire he'd ever had about her, as if willing himself to purge her from his system. Some while later, Harry dimly heard a throat being cleared somewhere out in the darkness. Apparently, Bill was back. Harry ignored him; he still had some purging to do. The coughing from the edge of the pitch got rather louder.

"Bill should really see someone about that cough," Harry drawled wryly, lifting off a decidedly flushed Cho Chang.

"I guess it's time to go," she agreed breathlessly.

The music from the party tent had faded by now and the teens rose to their feet, smiling coyly at each other and brushing grass and wildflowers from each other's clothes and hair. Cho giggled and swatted away Harry's wandering hands.

"Thank you very much, but I think I can handle it."

"You really shouldn't have to handle things on your own," Harry said reasonably, helpfully plucking grass from her chest.

Cho giggled and Harry grinned at her; he felt *so* good right now, lighter than air! He knew that Cho felt the same.

"So, I guess I'll see you back at school," he said.

"On the Quidditch pitch?" prompted Cho.

"If you like ..." he said suggestively.

Cho blushed and laughed. "You know what I mean." Her smooth brow creased. "Oh, what should we tell people about us? I don't particularly want to turn up in the paper again tomorrow."

Harry and Cho agreed that not only was it nobody else's business, there was already far too much attention on them. They decided to just quietly tell their friends about it when all the media hoopla had died down.

"I really do wish things turned out differently for us, Harry," Cho said softly. She gave him one last long and tender kiss, her fingers deep in his hair, his hands tight around her back, then she pulled away, breathless, and Disapparated with a loud crack.

Standing alone in the centre of the black pitch, the Boy-Who-Survived-Cho-Chang inhaled deeply of the sweet night air and decided it hadn't been such a bad game after all. Bill sidled up to him and steered him back towards the Harpies' tent.

"So I'm guessing you and Cho didn't break up after all," he said dryly.

"Oh no, we did," Harry said brightly, handing Bill his tissues.

Bill did a double take. "But ..." he started.

Harry smiled up at his personal Curse-Breaker and said with an innocent air, "Well, you told me to be nice to her ..."

The party was still in full swing when Bill and Harry slipped back into the tent. The DA members stood scattered around the crowded tent, basking in the celebrity glow of First League Quidditch players. Harry spotted Ron and Natalie deep in conversation in a corner. Smirking, he decided his

company was not required and went looking for Neville, intending to invite him and his parents to the island for a holiday. Before he could even broach the subject, an excited Neville volunteered that he'd talked his grandmother into letting his parents come home for the rest of the summer.

"She keeps saying they won't know any different," Neville said, shaking his head. "We know the truth, though; that's all that matters. Mind you," he added darkly, "if Malfoy makes one more crack about Saint Mungo's ..."

"Then he'll have both of us to deal with," Harry declared stoutly.

Standing amongst his friends, nibbling on Harpies-shaped pretzels, Harry gazed around contentedly — for once in his life, all his little chess pieces were lining up exactly the way he wanted. The Longbottoms were going to break free of Saint Mungo's. Remus had *three* whole weeks left of the summer to try to patch things up with his wife. Ron looked like he might be falling for a girl who was actually interested in him. And to cap it all off, Cho didn't hate him! Not even the occasional stinging in his scar could dampen Harry's spirits right now.

"You okay?" asked Ron, handing Harry a Butterbeer. "You look a lot better than before."

"No, I'm good," Harry assured him. "Just needed to lie down for a bit."

Natalie's lips twitched. She reached out to pluck some grass from Harry's jet-black hair and said, "What happened to Cho?"

"Cho?" Harry smiled softly. "I'm afraid she had to go."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 24 – Captains Courageous

Remus squinted piercingly into Harry's eyes over their morning cuppa.

"Quicksilver's almost gone," he observed.

Harry dashed to the mirror to check for himself, pulling his eyelids this way and that. It seemed the emotional hurricanes of the inquest and Quidditch match had been good for something, sucking up the residual quicksilver in his system.

"Come on, drink up," Remus said, indicating a tray of potions Elizabeth left for him.

Harry eyed them with distaste then smiled reluctantly on spotting a chilled Brain Booster milkshake in the mix. Saving that one for last, he tossed back a shot of Vim and another of Vigour.

"Felt anything more from Voldemort?" Remus asked as he measured out a dram of slimy green Vitality.

"Nothing useful," Harry said apologetically. "I tried extra hard to protect my mind last night ... sorry ..."

Remus looked up sharply. "Don't be," he said with a shudder and turned back to his measuring. "I want you practicing your Occlumency as much as possible. We don't want a repeat of what was happening in the hospital, now, do we." Remus stopped what he was doing. "Hey, none of that," he said chidingly, correctly interpreting the look of shame on Harry's face. "Kreacher's doing fine. Come on, we talked about this — you were half-drugged out of your mind and in no condition to understand what — if anything — you were doing."

Harry said nothing to that; he might have been out of his mind, but he had a pretty good idea what he'd been doing.

The morning after the Holyhead Harpies' Quidditch match, Elizabeth met her brother over breakfast in her room at the Leaky Cauldron. Open on the table was the *Daily Prophet's* report on their spectacular win. Julius Vanished the newspaper. Smoothing his placemat, he announced his refusal to dwell upon the Puddlemere tragedy. Instead, he turned to the topic of Remus Lupin, who he 'happened to meet' at the match. Julius assured Elizabeth he had dutifully kept to neutral subjects, but airily confided that his brother-in-law had spent the evening discreetly pumping *him* for information about his sister. Apparently, Remus had done an especially poor job of concealing his delight when Julius 'just happened to mention' his sister was still single.

"How could you tell him that?" Elizabeth sputtered indignantly.

Julius merely raised an eyebrow and returned to spreading runny marmalade to every corner of his toast. Elizabeth didn't know what to think. On the one hand, her pride didn't fancy Remus thinking she lived like a nun when he was clearly no monk, but, on the other hand, she was glad to know he was happy she wasn't seeing anyone.

Before leaving for Grimmauld Place, she took a critical look at herself in her mirror. Whilst the boys were at the Quidditch, Julius had packed her off to Tunbridge Wells Spa for a day of pampering that had done wonders for her self-confidence. Not only had the Cosmetic-Healers treated her to relaxing massages and aromatherapies, but they deftly eliminated lots of niggling cuts, scrapes, and bruises and a few stray grey hairs, as well. Though in her late thirties, with all the usual character-defining fine lines, Elizabeth knew she looked fairly good for her age — even without concealment charms. And today she'd tossed aside her demure robes and sensible shoes in favour of strappy sandals and a short, sleeveless dress in crisp, pink linen. Around her neck dangled an amethyst necklace, a gift from Remus for their second wedding anniversary. She closed her hand around the stone and felt a painfully familiar rush of love and joy flood through her.

"Turn around," instructed a wheezy voice.

Elizabeth pivoted obediently before the mirror. She knew she was being superficial and that inner beauty was all that truly mattered, but this was not a time when she felt like being politically correct. Even though her husband proved long ago he didn't care how ratty she looked, Elizabeth wanted to make the point that — well, she wasn't quite sure what the point was any more, she just knew she wanted to feel desirable for a change.

"Not too shabby," wheezed the mirror approvingly.

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief and adjusted her boobs — a little cleavage never hurt.

All packed for their island holiday, Harry and Remus were in the library, searching for books for Harry's NEWT essays, when Elizabeth arrived. Harry thought she looked rather pretty today — shinier — as if she'd been through a car-wash. He smirked into Paracelsus's *Book of Vexations* on seeing Remus stand up straighter and try to smooth back his hair.

"Good morning," she said pleasantly, nodding to them both. In her arms curled a cat that was even uglier than Crookshanks. "Harry? I don't think you've met my Kneazle, Evil."

"Evil the Kneazle?" Harry prompted.

Both Remus and Elizabeth looked at him blankly. Harry shook his head; where were the Muggle-borns when you needed them? He reached out

to pet the golden feline and it jumped straight into his arms. Both Elizabeth and Remus seemed surprised by that, but Harry didn't mind; he was happy enough to let *this* kind of Evil snuggle up to him.

Glancing around, Elizabeth ran a finger along the spines of a row of books, which purred with pleasure. "So ... what are we looking for?"

Remus's eyes hadn't left his wife since she'd entered the room. "Oh, just some things for Harry — homework, general reading."

He plucked a book from the shelves without really looking. Elizabeth smiled and reached for it.

"Oh, lovely!" she cooed. "This is such a wonderful novel for a boy."

Harry and Remus exchanged a quizzical look over Elizabeth's head; Remus clearly had no idea what he'd pulled off the shelf.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"*Captains Courageous*, by Rudyard Kipling," replied Elizabeth. She smiled reminiscently as she turned the novel over in her hands. "I remember Lily giving James a copy of this back in sixth year."

Harry stared at his godmother disbelievingly. "I thought Mum hated him then?"

Elizabeth grimaced. "Hate might be a bit strong — but, yes, she wasn't too fond of him back then."

"Why'd she give him a present then?"

"Ah, well, it wasn't really a *present*. More like a dare, really. He kept pestering her to go out with him, you see, and she finally agreed but on one condition: that he write her a three-foot scroll on the boy in this book."

Remus leaned against a library ladder with his arms crossed.

"I never knew that," he said, chuckling affectionately.

Elizabeth smiled softly at Remus, and he smiled back then stumbled a little when his rolling ladder gave way. Elizabeth pretended not to notice, but Harry saw her lips twitching as she idly flicked through the novel. She turned back to the front and gasped softly before passing it to Harry.

"James must have lent it to Sirius at some point," Elizabeth murmured.

An inscription was written on the inside in curly, feminine script. Harry had never seen his mother's handwriting. He stared at it for a long moment before registering the message:

Prove me wrong,

Lily.

"What's the story about?" he asked Elizabeth but Remus answered.

"A rather annoying, pampered little snot who falls off an ocean liner smack dab in the middle of the Atlantic about a hundred years ago."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked Remus, but Remus was busy eyeing Elizabeth's legs as she hopped up on the edge of the table. Elizabeth crossed her ankles primly.

"You'll just have to read it, now, won't you?" she said teasingly. She tipped her head towards Remus. "Or better yet, why don't you get Remy to read it to you? He has the most wonderful Wand of Eloquence."

Harry raised his eyebrows questioningly at his guardian. Remy? Wand of Eloquence?

"I'm afraid my voices are rather rusty these days," Remus demurred.

"Right ..." Harry said dubiously, "... so Dad wrote his essay on this little prat, and then he made Mum go out with him?"

"Ah, no, actually," replied Elizabeth. "James never wrote the essay — or if he did he never gave it to Lily — and he stopped pestering her to go out with him."

Harry stared. "But — but how'd they get together then?"

Elizabeth offered a slight Gallic shrug. "He said he'd wait for *her* to ask *him*."

Returning to Black Island, the morning's major activity was choosing where to sleep. Roaming the guesthouses, Harry quickly dismissed the Pink Palace: a Taj Mahal-like Indian guesthouse that was *way* too girlie for a sixteen-year-old lad. The rooms were painted a kaleidoscope of different shocking colours: hot-pink, livid-orange, lime-green, passionate-purple — all with delicately painted white flowers running around the edges of the walls. Filling every room were intricately carved white wooden furniture, plush rugs, and shimmering cushions. White-painted shutters protected curvy ogive windows. It looked like some kind of harem to Harry, with low day beds dressed with delicate silks lining alcoves in the walls.

"Lily and I stayed here together," Elizabeth recalled fondly.

Harry smiled at that; he could just bet that Parvati and Lavender would go nuts for the place — all the girls, really — they'd absolutely love it. He could already see another big house party with all his friends. Maybe for his seventeenth ...

"What do you think, Harry?" Elizabeth asked him.

Lost in thought, Harry said, "It'd be brilliant for my harem." Elizabeth and Remus burst out laughing. Harry blushed beetroot. "No, I meant it'd be good for my girlfriends — I mean, my friends that are girls — I mean — oh, forget it!"

They didn't, and Harry stormed off full of dark thoughts about exactly what he'd like to do with the quill of the reporter who'd said he had a harem!

Well, he *tried* to storm off; unfortunately, he got tangled up in a bunch of dangling silver beads. Alas, the more Harry struggled, the tighter they gripped, trussing him up tighter than Devil's Snare. The beads appeared to have a mind of their own, and Harry needed to be rescued by his smirking guardian and his helplessly giggling godmother.

"You see what I have to put up with?" Remus asked Elizabeth.

"Shut — up — now!" Harry grunted as he twisted futilely against the Chastity Beads that Elizabeth explained had captured him.

"Harry, please, you need to relax," she pleaded, trying not to laugh. "You're just making them angry."

"Making *them* angry!" roared Harry.

Elizabeth stomped her foot against the tears welling in her eyes. Remus was even more useless, doubled over with laughter.

"Darling, *please*!" Elizabeth begged Harry. "You need to stop thinking *impure* thoughts! They'll never let you go otherwise."

It took quite some time.

Sat on a plinth in a premium position where several paths crossed, three hag-like Marbles gossiped away in the sunshine. One hag had a ball of yarn, another was waving around a pair of scissors, and the third had a measuring tape. The Marbles reminded Harry of Molly Weasley and her knitting (although Molly Weasley was much nicer looking). On spotting Harry, the hags fell silent a moment then gazed piercingly at Elizabeth and Remus before resuming their conversation. Elizabeth said the Marbles were the Divine Spinners of Destiny. They were knitting hags to Harry.

Both Ron and Natalie had been invited to join Harry on the island, though Ron — to the immense frustration of the three teens — was indentured under some kind of magical contract to Auntie Muriel and her Malevolent Mould for another week yet. When the party finally moved along, Harry discovered a rustic bungalow hidden away by the shore of a small beach. The Beachside Bungalow had its own snake-shaped swimming pool that meandered through dense ferns and bougainvillea (and not a Chastity Bead in sight!). With rough-hewn wooden beams, ochre-rendered walls, and a modest central lounge that opened straight onto the beach, it had the unfussy air of a place that could easily cope with teenagers. Harry knew it would be *perfect* for him and Ron.

"This one," he decided firmly.

Elizabeth sucked in a sharp breath. Remus looked at her with concern.

"Is that okay?" Harry asked slowly.

"Of course," she said, forcing a smile. She strolled slowly around the lounge and picked up a golden seashell from the coffee table. Turning it over in her hands, she said, "This place was a favourite of Sirius's. It's a good choice: close to everything but secluded. I'm sure you'll love it."

Remus checked the two bedrooms and asked Harry which he preferred, offering to take the other. Harry's face fell. He wasn't counting on sharing with his guardian.

"Unless you'd prefer I stayed somewhere else ..." Remus suggested with a lopsided smile.

"Only if you'd rather," Harry mumbled hopefully.

Remus didn't seem bothered. "I suppose I could take a room in the old White Villa. Nice view up there."

"I might take my old room then," Elizabeth decided, as they strolled back up the hill for lunch. "That's it over there," she said, pointing out an elegant guesthouse she called the Rose Villa. U-shaped around a pretty courtyard garden, the Rose Villa boasted two gracious bedrooms connected by a luxuriously appointed bathroom.

Standing at the foot of Elizabeth's mahogany four-poster, Harry fingered its sheer muslin curtains and suggested to Remus with an innocent air, "Why don't you stay here with Elizabeth? Then you'll be close to everything."

Both Remus and Elizabeth both looked very uncomfortable. Harry was having none of it.

"It's only fifty yards from my place," he reasoned. "You'll be able to keep tabs on me."

Remus started umming and ahhing. Elizabeth was turning a steadily deeper shade of pink.

"Go on," persisted Harry. He decided to play his trump card. "I might need you — you know — if I get a vision or something, and that White Villa's a *long* way up the hill."

"It's a two-minute walk," countered Remus.

"But you wouldn't *hear* me if I needed you to come down," said Harry.

"If you're worried, I can stay in *your* bungalow."

Harry pursed his lips. Just how thick was his guardian?

"Remy, it's fine," Elizabeth said stiffly. "There are two bedrooms here."

"Excellent!" Harry declared before Remus could voice another objection.

Looking anywhere but at Remus, Elizabeth nodded and said, "I'll let the elves know where to unpack our things."

The moment she Disapparated, Remus spun on Harry. "Just what do you think you're playing at?"

"What?" Harry said, smirking.

"You know perfectly well what," said Remus, not at all amused. "I'll thank you to stop manipulating Elizabeth into doing what you want. Did it never occur to you she might not feel comfortable sharing a house with me — let alone a bed? That maybe she moved out of Grimmauld Place for a reason?"

"I — no — I just ..." Harry felt his face growing hot. "I'm sorry. You can stay with me, if you like — or up in the white one ..."

"No, I can't," Remus said severely. "She's sending my things down here as we speak. Just how do you think she's going to feel if I turn around and say, 'No thanks, I'd rather sleep as far away from you as I can?' And that day on the beach — using emotional blackmail to get her to stay. Did you never stop to consider that Elizabeth is still grieving for Sirius? How this place must constantly remind her of their time here together?"

"I — I'm sorry," Harry stammered lamely, "I didn't ... I — I just ..."

"Just stop messing about!" Remus said sharply, his eyes sparkling with real anger now. "Elizabeth asked me for time to deal with her grief before we talked about us, and I'm *trying* to honour her request!"

Harry nodded unhappily to his feet. "I'm sorry, Remus."

Remus just stood there for a several horribly long silent moments.

"I know you are, Harry," he said more evenly, "but do me a favour and let me and my wife sort out our own problems in our own time."

Harry nodded again, but Remus was already striding out the doors and up the hill, his head hanging and his hands clasped behind his back. Evil hissed disapprovingly at Harry before racing off as well. Harry trailed after them, full of a kind of miserable that only Remus Lupin could ever make him feel.

At lunch, in addition to delicately seasoned perch, spiced calamari, and saffron infused scallops, there was an enormous bowl of hot chips accompanied by at least a dozen tomato sauces and salsas, but Harry barely touched any of it. In fact, he'd scarcely said two words all through lunch. He was busy kicking himself for making things worse. Why couldn't he have just left well-enough alone?

"Do you not like the food, Harry?" asked Elizabeth kindly. "I'm sure the elves could whip up something else ..."

"Huh?" said Harry. "Oh, no, everything tastes great."

Elizabeth smiled uncertainly and turned towards Remus to say, "I'll be staying at the pub again tonight."

Remus stiffened, as did Harry.

"Why?" Harry said at once. "I mean — sorry — nothing."

Elizabeth explained she was having dinner with her brother and niece.

"Julius is keen to know my plans for the — for the next month," she said, looking anywhere but at Remus. "And I'm bringing Natalie here tomorrow, so I thought I might as well stay over. It's just the one night," she assured Harry.

Harry nodded and resumed pushing his food around his plate. The silence at the table lengthened, broken only by the clinking of knives and forks on the Black family china.

"Harry?" she started again. "I was thinking we might plan a few more Occlumency lessons. Maybe a little each day. What do you think?"

"I guess so," Harry said.

"Maybe we could take a swim in the lake this afternoon?" she suggested hopefully. "There are some wonderful caves to explore ..."

Shrugging apologetically, Harry admitted he didn't know how to swim. "Not very well anyway."

"I could teach you," Remus offered lightly.

The tightness in Harry's chest loosened a little. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all," said Remus. "You'll want to eat a bit more lunch, though."

The slight tilt of the man's head — the unspoken forgiveness — did wonders for Harry's appetite.

"Stop blinking!"

"I'm *trying*!"

Harry hadn't wanted to swim blind, so Remus came down to his bungalow and was trying to help him put in his new contact lenses. It wasn't going well. Harry was ready to give up when Dovey intervened. Within moments, the elf had deftly slipped the lenses right into place. Harry blinked several times, feeling both surprised and very grateful. He and Remus had been trying for twenty minutes to do that!

Before long, Harry was getting his very first swimming lesson in the pristine pool off the Grand Salon. Harry was somewhat surprised to find Remus was a strong swimmer but not at all surprised he was a good teacher. Well, when he wasn't sneaking glances at his wife, who, after a few lazy laps in her red one-piece swimming costume, had fallen asleep sunning herself on the smooth sandstone edge of the pool.

With Remus's help, Harry slowly started getting the hang of things (although he privately thought Gillyweed was a lot easier). His lesson was interrupted a few times by the black and white swan; it kept flying into the water, wanting to swim with him. There was also a family of brightly plumed peacocks, but Harry didn't mind them since they were content to just parade around on the grass. Eventually, he gave up shooing the swan away and let it swim along beside him. More tired from his swimming lesson than he cared to admit, he spent the rest of the afternoon settling into his bungalow and finding homes for all his pets. Hedwig quickly stamped her authority over the black and white swan. She made it very clear who was in charge and the swan stayed meekly outside. Mirabella, who had been carefully repaired by Hestia, was thrilled with the bungalow's serpentine swimming pool, and there were even some bronze sculptures for her to play with. A bronze crab, a turtle, and another fish were all eager to get to know the new girl, despite her crooked eyelashes.

Frank slept all day; he was worn out from celebrating Harry's split from Cho. When he finally woke, yawning and smacking his jaws, he looked around with bemusement, wondering where he was. It turned out he wasn't too keen on sand but otherwise liked his new surroundings well enough. He was thoroughly appalled, though, when he discovered that Harry had found yet *another* swan, which he disdainfully dubbed 'Cho2'. Frank refused her entry to the bungalow (even though Hedwig already had that all sorted) and he took to patrolling the doorways just in case 'that feathered fiend' moved an inch from her designated position floating peacefully in the outdoor spa. Lovey made a great fuss over the python and humbly presented him with a little silver bowl of tuna flakes infused with lemongrass, which improved Frank's humour no end (Harry belatedly recalled the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black was rather partial to serpents).

Remus and Harry spent the evening alone in Harry's bungalow, dinner on their laps, their feet on the coffee table, watching the Sun redden the sky and blacken the sea from the comfort of the lounge. Fire bowls and dozens of tea lights provided a warm glow to the evening. After dinner, Evil curled up on Harry's lap; he seemed to be giving the lad a second chance.

"I'm really sorry about this morning," ventured Harry.

"I know, son," said Remus. "It's all right. I probably overreacted a bit, myself."

"So we're good?"

Remus reached across and caressed Evil's ears. "Yeah, we're good." He blew out his cheeks and sighed deeply. "I feel a bit guilty, actually; I was quite pleased enough at the time to have Lizzie decide to stay for the rest of summer."

"I think she does like it here," offered Harry. Evil purred contentedly and snuggled into Harry's stomach. It seemed he agreed.

"True," Remus said, smiling softly. "You know, you'll hate me saying this, but there really is a lot of your father in you."

"Before or after he deflated his head?"

Remus chuckled. "After. But you definitely have the Marauder gene."

Harry stretched across the coffee table for the slim novel Lily gave James. Flicking through it, he noticed it was well-thumbed, and that his dad seemed to have scribbled a lot of tiny notes through it — or maybe that was someone else — the handwriting looked a bit like Harry's own ...

"Is that Dad's handwriting?" he asked Remus.

Remus took the book and squinted at the small writing.

"Looks like it." He frowned in concentration and slowly read something out. "Must remember to stop being a total tosser ..."

"He did *not* write that!" laughed Harry. He grabbed the book back and checked for himself then jabbed Remus in the side; the note said nothing of the sort. "So, what's this 'Wand of Eloquence' thing Elizabeth was going on about?"

Remus grimaced. "Just poor man's theatre. Putting on different voices — something to amuse the children."

"Well?" prompted Harry.

Remus shook his head. "I've not done it for years."

Harry grinned evilly, thoroughly enjoying his discomfort. "And?" he challenged.

Remus groaned ruefully and hung his head.

"Oh, come on, *Remy*," teased Harry. Remus's grey eyes narrowed, but Harry was highly amused. "Go on," he wheedled, "I'm sick, remember?" He gazed mournfully up at his guardian and offered a pitiful cough.

"Oh, *please*," Remus said disdainfully. "Surely, you can do better than that?"

Harry attempted puppy-dog eyes but found it too hard to keep a straight face.

"Come on then," Remus decided briskly. "We're going to need some room."

The Sun had long gone and Harry bundled up Evil and scarpered barefoot after Remus down to the beach. Remus looked around appraisingly and nodded to himself. He summoned blankets and plump pillows from the bungalow and, with a flick of his wand, laid them neatly on the cool sand.

"Sit," he ordered.

Harry and Evil sat. Remus floated candles down from the bungalow and also the two big fire bowls for warmth. After conjuring a wooden lectern, he set *Captains Courageous* open upon it.

"Just be a tick," he mumbled, flicking through the first chapter. "Been a while since I read this ..."

Harry grinned with anticipation into the darkness. Then he happened to look up.

"Whoa," he breathed.

Stars. Thousands of glittering stars. Harry had never seen anything like it. He fell back on his pillow and stared skywards in awe. With his naked eye, he could see constellations and planets he'd only ever seen with Professor Sinistra's strongest telescope.

"Bet you could see to eternity from here," he breathed.

"Ahem," said Remus.

Harry immediately sat back up and hugged a pillow in his lap, looking up expectantly. Remus cleared his throat again and drew his wand. He pointed it at the novel and said, "*Articulacy!*"

Two golden wings sprouted from Remus's wand tip. The wings fluttered, as if ready to take flight. Using his golden winged wand as if it were a microphone, Remus started reading the first few paragraphs in his familiar hoarse voice. Harry's eyes widened with delight when a petulant childish voice came out of Remus's mouth, then a gnarly sea captain, then other voices of all ages: bickering teens, posh women, gruff Germans — and sound effects, too: water lapping, footsteps on timber boards. Remus's wand was whipping around like the baton of an orchestra conductor, sending swirling fog creeping around Harry and Evil in the flickering firelight.

As the story went, a snotty nosed fifteen-year-old boy, Harvey, was travelling on an ocean liner between New York and Plymouth. He was mouthing off about how rich and important his family was, how many racehorses and yachts his father owned, how much pocket money he got, how many cool toys he had. A foghorn bellowed and Harry nearly jumped out of his skin. Remus smugly turned the page and continued with the story. Oddly enough, the boastful boy on the ocean liner found his audience kept disappearing. He also found he was rapidly becoming more and more unwelcome around the ship (which he naturally put down to everyone just being jealous of his brilliance). He was just in the middle of showing off how well he could smoke cigars, when he suddenly started feeling rather green around the gills (which he naturally put down to seasickness). Harvey soon found himself hanging over the handrail emptying his stomach into the Atlantic Ocean. Then, with a great splash from Remus's wand, he fell overboard.

"HA!" crowed Harry, thumping his pillow in victory. "Serves him right! Sounds just like Malfoy."

Remus chuckled. "Perhaps," he said. He looked at Harry shrewdly. "Or James. He could be a right little show off when the mood took him."

Harry shrugged; he didn't deny the comparison.

"Do the bit where he throws up and falls overboard again," he pleaded.

Remus chuckled and closed the book.

"Hang on," complained Harry. "So what happens next? Keep going! Does he get eaten by sharks? Oh — no, no — better yet, he gets swallowed by a Giant Squid!"

"Heartless little sod, you are!" laughed Remus.

"He deserves some terrible fate, doesn't he?" reasoned Harry.

Remus smiled mysteriously. "He thinks it's a terrible fate."

"Well?" demanded a voice next to Harry. "Don't leave us hanging, my good man!" Harry was surprised to find Frank coiled on a pillow next to Evil. Looking out into the darkness, Harry spotted a crowd of white figures hovering on the fringes of the beach.

"See?" Harry challenged Remus, waving his hands around. "You've got a fan club." Harry beckoned the Marbles closer. "Come on, guys!"

Remus's lips twitched with amusement and he reopened the book and skimmed ahead for a few minutes before continuing. Harry looked around gleefully as Aphard's Marbles crept closer and whispered excitedly amongst themselves. Andrea the singing ghost drifted past, swinging serenely on his pool cue. At last, Remus cleared his throat and silence fell immediately.

To Harry's dismay, Harvey was rescued, caught on the line of a fisherman, Manuel, who deftly plucked him out of the sea like a drowned Wormtail. Manuel rowed his day's catch, including his half-drowned 'little-fish', back to the main schooner. When Harvey came to, he imperiously demanded to be taken to the skipper. The skipper was a tough old salt but kind. He took pity on the boy, who was clearly delusional, raving as he was, telling tall tales of his 'millionaire' father. The skipper offered to let the boy earn his keep until the schooner had sailed its season and returned home to Gloucester. Harvey was less than enthusiastic about gutting and sleeping with fish for four months. He sulked. He pouted. He quickly made himself deeply unpopular.

Frank, Evil, Harry, and the Marbles sat entranced beneath the glittering sky and watched and listened for hours to Remus's 'poor man's theatre'. Remus conjured dramatic illusions: massive schooners, smelly fish, spooky calms and raging storms, but it was the transformation in Harvey that struck a chord with Harry. Hunger and boredom had got him off his backside initially, but then he started getting a clue and grew to admire the fearless and hardworking fishermen, seeing tragic deaths and chivalry, too, amongst the schooners plying the treacherous seas of the Grand Bank off Newfoundland. It wasn't long before he was working like a house-elf: gutting fish, scrubbing decks, scouring pots and pans, doing anything and everything asked of him. His hands grew callused and he even began to take pride in his work, growing up in those four months in a way no grammar school could replicate, save Hogwarts, perhaps.

A very hoarse Remus finished *Captains Courageous* to great cheers and applause. Then Andrea came forward and sang for them — right there on the beach. Frank was enchanted, but it was all in Italian, which didn't mean too much to Harry, though he enjoyed Andrea's velvety voice. As he lay there, staring into the stars, Harry's thoughts turned to his father. The Harvey in the novel and James Potter weren't the same boy but there were similarities. He could see what his mother had been trying to show his dad: that he didn't need to show off to prove himself.

"A Sickle for your thoughts," Remus offered from a nearby blanket, his lined face younger in the firelight.

"Just thinking about Dad," Harry admitted.

Remus didn't seem surprised. "Are you still troubled about what you saw in Snape's Pensieve?"

"No," said Harry. "Maybe a bit. Mum was so angry with him. At one point, I even wondered if ..." Harry's voice trailed off; he couldn't say it.

"You wondered ..." prompted Remus. Harry was glad it was dark. He took a minute to answer.

"At one point, I wondered if he used love potions or something to force her to marry him," he admitted shamefully.

Remus said nothing for a long moment. "Harry, I know you have only Snape's memory to go on, but believe me, James would have never used Dark Magic on your mother."

"I know," Harry said truthfully. "I know they loved each other when they had me. It's just — it's just hard to understand why she gave him a chance in the first place."

Remus stared skywards. "People change, Harry; they grow up. James came from a loving home, a wealthy family, was naturally gifted ... he had everything going for him." Remus shook his head slightly at the stars as if chastising them. "It's all about choices, son. What you *do* with the hand fate deals you. James made some poor choices early on, but he grew out of it ..." Remus looked sideways and smiled a little. "But to be fair, he never had the advantages you and I had."

Harry snorted a laugh. "Come again?"

"Adversity," Remus said simply, "necessity, thirst, suffering ... these things build character."

"Yeah," said Harry, "well, you and I have just got *character* to burn."

Remus chuckled. "That we do, that we do ..."

"So, you reckon Dad was a prat because he had it too good?" said Harry.

"Pretty much," said Remus. He turned back to the glittering sky and shook his head with mock sadness. "Poor sod never stood a chance."

Harry grinned at his guardian's dark profile and said, "Until Mum came along."

Remus casually tossed *Captains Courageous* onto Harry's blanket and said, "Until he chose to prove her wrong."

Harry's dreams that night were full of fish and sea captains and salty storms.

"What the ...?" he spluttered. "Gawd!"

He woke at dawn to find Cho2 nibbling his ear. Shoving the swan away, he tried to blink moisture into eyes that felt full of gravel. He still had his contacts in. Squinting painfully, he saw he was still on the beach, covered with blankets against the cold dawn. Another long, blanket-covered lump lay a few yards away. Cho2 tried to climb onto his lap and Harry pushed her off. Where was Frank when he needed him? Looking around, Harry found Frank coiled up under a pillow. A few hissed words of drowsy singing emitted from the python — possibly in Italian. Lying around the beach were other pets and Marbles, peacefully slumbering wherever they had lain the night before. A soft pop sounded.

"Master?" said a timid voice above Harry's head.

Harry smacked his dry lips. "Eh?"

Dovey nudged him back onto his pillow, removed his contacts and squirted soothing drops into his eyes. Then he slid a leash around Cho2's black neck and led her away. Returning with Harry's glasses, Dovey offered to bring his master his breakfast. Harry smiled sleepily at his new house-elf. He could get very used to this.

"Just some tea, thanks, Dovey. And coffee for Remus."

Dovey returned within minutes. Harry tossed Frank's pillow at Remus, causing maximum distress to two birds with one stone. Frank immediately slithered under Harry's warm blanket and fell fast asleep again. Remus wriggled over with his blanket wrapped around his shoulders to get his coffee.

"Dovey?" Remus yawned, squinting around.

"Yes, Master Lupin."

"We're going to need to move."

Dovey bowed deeply. "Yes, Master Lupin. Dovey will alert the Marbles."

Dovey hurried off down the beach, and Harry looked at Remus quizzically. Remus grinned sleepily back at him over his steaming coffee and said, "Ever driven an island?"

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Sod off."

Remus had just clipped the western-most tip of Sicily. Again. For security reasons, Elizabeth wanted the island moved to a second secure location off the ancient Wizarding city of Agrigentum, on the southern coast of Sicily. She was in London, getting ready to bring Natalie to Sicily by International Portkey.

"Hang on," Remus mumbled. "I just need to reverse a bit."

They both winced at the distant sounds of grating rocks. Dovey was squeezing his eyes shut. Black Island's bridge was at the top of the Wheelhouse, a lighthouse-like building boasting a huge ship's wheel and windows around 360 degrees. Harry consulted the bridge's three-dimensional map table

"Okay," he murmured, stretching his tape-measure along the coast of Sicily. "You need to go due south-east for like ... a hundred miles."

Remus spun the great wooden wheel 135 degrees to the right and engaged a long brass lever labelled 'Go Forth!'

They all breathed a sigh of relief when nothing happened. Dovey opened his eyes and scurried over to the Are-We-There-Yet woodpecker. The toy woodpecker was charmed to bang its beak into a battered old wooden bust of Uncle Alphard's head, and then, when the head fell off, you knew you'd arrived at your destination (a device, Dovey said, that was created by Master Alphard when Master Sirius was about eight years old). The woodpecker ruffled its feathers then started tapping away steadily, which meant the island was calmly floating along again without any problems. The faster the island floated, the faster the woodpecker pecked. A Peck-o-meter on the wall showed they were floating along at a comfortable sixty pecks per minute, roughly equivalent to sixty miles per hour. Harry, swivelling on a high stool, thought he spotted something and grabbed his Omnioculars.

"Moony?" he said warily.

"What?" Remus said distractedly, then swore under his breath. "Okay, I see it."

Remus navigated around the Muggle freighter and they resumed their journey. Elizabeth had explained that to Muggles, Black Island was just a little old fishing boat that looked like it had seen better days: perfectly harmless and uninteresting. The island boasted many state-of-the-art Muggle Repellents, charms that made Muggles suddenly remember that they urgently needed to be some place else, and that what they *really* needed, was a fine bottle of red and a good lie down somewhere far, far away. Any unwanted visitors (Muggle or otherwise) that *did* happen to stumble too close to the island, would suddenly find themselves in a very strong current that kept making them drift safely off course. As a last resort, intruders would be sucked into whirlpools and ejected several miles away (but Elizabeth said that that hadn't happened for at least a hundred years). As for access from the air: to Muggles, it still looked like an uninteresting little fishing boat, and to Wizarding Folk, just another rich Muggle resort.

Harry began to grow annoyed that Remus kept putting him off taking a turn driving, but when Remus got thoroughly tangled up trying to get around a Sicilian fishing fleet, Harry suddenly found his back seat driving position much more entertaining. No one breathed a sigh of relief deeper than Remus when Uncle Alphard's wooden head finally fell off. Despite needing to bang his head into the door for his impertinence, Dovey couldn't resist mentioning that the trip from Carthage to Agrigentum was a trip that usually took Mistress Elizabeth less than thirty minutes.

When Elizabeth and Natalie arrived, Natalie fell completely (and predictably) in love with the Pink Palace. Harry wished her luck. The house-elves prepared a magnificent welcome feast in honour of the new guest's arrival, and the foursome dined in splendour in the Grand Salon. Harry had a feeling any excuse would do for a feast on Black Island. Harry's camera was kept busy, too, blinking happily around the table.

Elizabeth turned to her husband and asked, "Did you — er —" she wiggled her hand like a fish, "have any trouble?"

"None at all," Remus said smoothly.

"Tripe, Master Lupin?"

"Not right now, thank you, Dovey."

Over coffee and cake, Harry noticed Lovey trying to catch his eye. She kept pointing under his chair.

"Oh, Natalie," he said, "I've got something for you." Harry reached below his chair and retrieved a present elaborately decorated with half the hibiscus flowers on the island. "Lovey wrapped it for me," he assured Natalie.

On opening her present, an album of party photos, Natalie shrieked with glee. "Awesome!" she cried happily, immediately flicking through the album and laughing as she read some of the cheeky captions.

"My friends wrote all that stuff," said Harry. "They put it together for you while I was in hospital."

The two teens pored over the album, with Natalie reading out the captions.

"Harry's *Harem* ?" she said archly. Elizabeth and Remus did poor jobs of hiding smiles.

"Sorry about that," mumbled Harry, remembering that the Harem joke had come from the gossip article written about him and Natalie and Cho. "My friends think it's this huge joke."

Natalie chose to let that slide and continued flicking through the album. She frowned slightly at happy photo of Remus and Hestia dancing together.

"I'll look at the rest later," Natalie said and abruptly closed the album. "I'm a bit tired, actually. Is it okay if I turn in?"

"Of course, darling," Elizabeth murmured, setting aside her napkin. "I'll walk you down."

"Could Harry take me?" asked Natalie.

Harry blinked. "Sure," he said politely, though he fervently hoped she didn't expect him to walk her *inside* the Torture Palace.

The pair walked in silence down the torch-lit path, past the Rose Villa and the Roman Bathhouse, and on through the gardens towards Natalie's palace. Natalie stopped at the pink marble steps and sat down.

"So, what's going on?" she asked bluntly. Harry just blinked. "Sit," Natalie ordered him and Harry sat on the shallow steps with her. "So who's this Hestia?"

"Hestia?" Harry repeated blankly. "Hestia Jones? She's Gwenog Jones's sister."

Natalie nodded to herself. "So *that's* why the Harpies invited you down."

"Er, yeah — well, kind of," said Harry, unable to reveal that Gwenog (or anyone else) was a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

"She and Uncle Remus looked awfully friendly on the dance floor," remarked Natalie.

"Well, yeah, they're friends," said Harry.

"More than friends?" pressed Natalie.

"Huh? Oh — no, no, nothing like that," said Harry quickly. "They're not going out or anything."

Natalie stared hard at him and Harry stared back, nonplussed. What did she want him to say?

"I want to know everything," Natalie demanded briskly, "and I want to know it now." She loosed an avalanche of questions, but Harry was hamstrung by his promise to Remus. "What do you mean 'you can't tell me'? He's *my* uncle! I just want to know what's going on, for Pete's sake!"

"Look, I just can't," protested Harry. "I promised I wouldn't say anything."

"So there *is* something!" Natalie declared triumphantly.

"No, I mean, yes, but — *arghh!*" Frustrated, Harry pulled at his wild black hair. "Look, there *was* a reason he left. And neither of them were happy about it, but it was no one's fault. The *way* he left was really stupid, and he regrets it more than anyone knows, but when she found him, and they talked stuff through, they both agreed to split up for good."

Natalie hugged her knees to her chest. "And that's all you're going to tell me? They're just going to stay married forever and live in two different countries."

Harry shrugged. "I guess. If that's what Elizabeth wants ..."

"Is that what Uncle Remus wants?"

"No. He wants her back more than anything. What does your aunt want?"

"Dunno," admitted Natalie. "But she went through about a dozen different outfits before we left London today."

"So?" Harry said blankly.

Natalie rolled her eyes. "And she got all dolled up for dinner ..." she said leadingly.

"Oh?" Harry wasn't giving up blank that easily. Then it hit him. "Oh!"

Natalie groaned into her knees. "Men are so thick. At this rate it'll be *another* ten years before they get back together."

Harry didn't mind being called thick if it meant Remus would have a chance of making things right with his wife. Lovey arrived just then with a tray of refreshments and sternly reminded Master Harry he needed his rest.

"Right," mumbled Natalie bossily to Harry through a mouthful of chocolate-dipped shortbread. "We need to come up with a strategy for getting those two sorted out. I'm thinking candle-lit dinners for two, romantic music, dancing, maybe a few good charms —"

"Hang on a minute," Harry cut in, mindful of the dressing down Remus had given him for interfering. "We can't force them."

Natalie rolled her eyes again. "Do you want them to get back together or not?"

"I do, but it has to be their choice."

"Spoilsport. Okay, but we can still help things along a bit, just getting out of their hair, giving them time alone ..."

"And they can talk or not ..." mused Harry. "Yeah, I could go for that."

The teens set about hatching a plan Natalie named after an ancient Roman festival that, among other things, celebrated the she-wolf that saved the twin founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, and that it was good for fertility and keeping out evil. Harry approved, to a point; he did draw the line at running naked through the garden, slapping people with strips of goatskin.

After much strategising on the steps of the Pink Palace, Natalie regally dismissed Harry, and he ambled off happily with a fistful of chocolate biscuits and the firm conviction that Operation Lupercalia couldn't possibly fail.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 25 – Operation Lupercalia

Plan A was for Harry and Natalie to make themselves scarce, but the olds weren't making that easy. They kept taking far too much interest in Harry's summer homework. Every chance they got, they'd shepherd him towards the Grand Salon, which they'd taken the liberty of dedicating as his 'homework centre', with books and instruments arranged neatly on every side of an octagonal table. Harry grumbled that he wasn't a Giant Squid, but his complaints fell on deaf ears and his progress was carefully monitored. Remus and Elizabeth were bad enough on their own, but when they got together they'd start bouncing around ideas for even more things Harry should cover in his essays. Natalie found it all highly amusing (*she'd* finished her summer projects in the first week of the holidays). While Harry worked, she lounged around reading from a huge stack of old Muggle comic books they'd found in the Mummy House. Being a pure-blood, Natalie thought two-dimensional black and white comics that stayed perfectly still were wonderfully strange.

But it wasn't all work; Elizabeth had prepared some Gillyweed, and Harry and Natalie had fun trying it out down on the beach. Natalie had never tried the weed before and Harry watched on, highly amused, as she sprouted gills and flippers and gasped for water before he did the same. When they weren't swimming, they were racing around on their Firebolts. Natalie's speed was excellent, and she could stop on a Sickle, but Harry had it all over her in terms of manoeuvrability. She craved learning the Wronski Feint, and she and Harry would dive at top speed towards the lake. Natalie had a lot of trouble with the manoeuvre, either pulling up too early or crashing into the water, in which case, she'd fly underwater and surface a hundred yards away, scaring her aunt half to death. The teens did hope such frights might inspire her to bury her face in Remus's chest, but no such luck.

With shared interests in sports and their olds, Harry and Natalie got along easily enough, but there was one thing that seriously tested their budding friendship. Their tastes in music were quite different. Natalie brought her mini music-box down to the bungalow, and it was full of wailing divas and Country and Western artists. Harry and Frank tried hard to be stoical in the face of such torment.

Although Natalie and Harry were doing their best to give the Lupins time alone, nothing much seemed to be happening on the romance front. Whilst Harry refused to indulge in dirty tricks, he was wholeheartedly behind smaller ruses, like making plans for 'family' outings on the far side of the island. Once settled in an appropriately beautiful spot, the teens would find an excuse to go exploring alone, pleading with the adults to 'mind their stuff'. And after dinner they'd disappear to the bungalow to scheme and take midnight swims in the serpentine pool. These small subterfuges helped a little, but everything was going far too slowly. Harry knew why Remus was holding back; he was waiting for Elizabeth to give a sign she was ready. But Elizabeth didn't seem to want to make the first move; Natalie reckoned she needed to be wooed. It was all very vexing for the teens. After two days, Operation Lupercalia seemed to have achieved very little, and Natalie's patience with her aunt and uncle's veneer of polite cheer was rapidly waning.

"So, Auntie Lizzie," she said coyly at dinner on the terrace, "what was yours and Uncle Remus's first date?"

Elizabeth exchanged a knowing smile with Remus. "Our first date ...?"

"I think we went on a picnic, didn't we?" prompted Remus. "Does that count?"

Elizabeth smiled mysteriously and twirled the wine in her goblet. "Well, we did have our first kiss, so I'd say it counts."

Harry surreptitiously watched his guardian watching Elizabeth; the wizard's grey eyes seemed to have darkened in the soft candlelight and there was an ache of longing in them that Harry had been seeing a lot during the last week. Elizabeth got that look, too.

Remus cleared his throat and poured his wife some more wine. "Well, I seem to recall we just about poisoned each other to death."

Elizabeth blurted a laugh. "We did!" she agreed, shaking her head fondly.

"Give!" Natalie ordered her uncle, grinning.

"So, we're having a nice little kiss," Remus started, addressing his goblet, "and all of sudden ..."

"Don't, *please*!" Elizabeth pleaded.

"... all of a sudden," Remus continued wickedly, "this one's diving for the bushes."

"You did *not* throw up!" Natalie challenged her aunt gleefully.

Elizabeth had gone rather pink and she glared at Remus, but Remus didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, well, *you* weren't far behind me," she reminded him primly. The teens leaned forward, all ears and eager for details.

"You see," Remus said to Natalie, savouring the story, "I'd *finally* worked up the courage to ask your aunt out, and for some reason we decided a picnic seemed a good idea. Somehow James got wind of it — that's Harry's father — and he absolutely insisted I cook something for Elizabeth. He seemed to think I could win her with food." Remus winced. "Unfortunately, James had never actually tasted my cooking."

Elizabeth picked up the tale. "And Lily got wind of that and insisted that if you were going to the trouble of making something, I had to as well." Elizabeth's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I still don't believe it was my chocolate cake that did it; I followed Petunia's recipe so faithfully ..."

Before Harry could wonder how Elizabeth managed to get his Aunt Petunia to part with one of her recipes, Remus was insisting that his roast

pork was so overcooked it couldn't possibly have been the cause either, washed down by a bottle of red Sirius had foisted on them as they left on their date.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "You don't think ... but we barely touched it ..."

Remus seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion and laughed. "That rotten little —"

"Dark bastard!" Elizabeth said indignantly. "He spiked it! That —"

She stopped abruptly, looking confused and upset with herself. A look of pain washed over Remus's face as well.

Harry stared sadly into his House of Black dinner plate; he knew exactly what Elizabeth was going through: feeling like it was wrong to laugh. He'd felt like that, too, for a while. Natalie looked around the table hesitantly.

"Sirius — Sirius Black —" she said, "the one who left Harry this island?"

"He was my godfather," Harry said. "He was killed a few months ago."

"I'm sorry," said Natalie quietly. "What was he like?"

"Good. Well, maybe a bit evil sometimes," Harry admitted wryly. "He loved a good prank ..."

Harry glanced at Elizabeth, who was smiling bravely, her eyes moist with unshed tears. Harry nudged Natalie and suggested they go down to the bungalow. Remus slipped him a grateful nod.

After coffee and port, and a private toast to their lost friend, Elizabeth and Remus took a long walk through the torch-lit gardens. As they strolled along, they talked of inconsequential things, mutual friends, the smell of the sea, Canadian Quodpot, Great Uncle Oliver's train set. Elizabeth hardly knew what she said; she was busy gathering her courage to ask what she *really* wanted to know.

"Remus," she started hesitantly as they arrived in the courtyard of the Rose Villa, "I know it's really none of my business ... but ... well ..." Elizabeth stopped; she just couldn't do it.

"Yes, Lizzie?" Remus prompted.

"I just — I wondered ..." Elizabeth's face grew warm. Remus looked at her quizzically. "I just wondered if — well — if you were seeing someone — I wondered if it were serious?" Mortified by the look of surprise on Remus's face, she blurted, "I'm sorry; don't answer that — it's none of my business."

"No," he said quickly. "I mean, no, I'm not. No — not at all. No."

"Oh." Elizabeth's heart soared, but now she felt like a complete idiot. "Well, that's — erm — I —" She blushed even more deeply. "I should — um — goodnight then."

Elizabeth fled for the safety of her room, leaving one very confused werewolf standing amongst the sweet-smelling roses.

Next morning found Harry firmly entrenched in the island's Potions House. Taking precedence over Operation Lupercalia was the fact that it was one week before the full moon and Elizabeth was brewing Remus's Wolfsbane Potion. She said the potion benefited considerably if given a chance to strengthen. Harry hovered close over her shoulder. He dearly hoped things would work out for the Lupins, but, if they didn't, he wanted to make sure he could make the potion himself. Elizabeth was happy for the company and set him to work grinding, pounding, and slicing ingredients for her.

"Hermione would *kill* to be in my place right now," Harry declared confidently as he carefully sliced sixteen, perfectly-equal slivers of ginger. He thought he might write her a letter and tell her all about it.

Elizabeth smiled slightly and examined his roots.

"Looks good," she murmured. "I'm going to need four long strands of dried Fluxweed next, separated with a copper knife."

Harry nodded and set to work. Elizabeth stopped him after a few minutes.

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, your strands are breaking too short." She passed him some more Fluxweed, showed him what to do, and Harry started again.

She placed two cauldrons side by side and encouraged Harry to try making a batch himself (under her close supervision). The pair worked all day in the steaming, smoking lab, with Elizabeth explaining everything she was doing and Harry making long and detailed notes. It was a massively complicated potion and there was little joking around. Harry didn't say anything, but he wondered if she was thinking that in just seven days she might, according to Remus's prophecy, herself be bitten.

"Now for the Aconite," Elizabeth said, swiping moisture from her brow.

She pulled on a pair of dragon-hide gloves and passed Harry a pair as well. Harry welcomed them; Aconite was another name for the Wolfsbane herb and every part of the plant — stem, flowers, seeds, all of it — was highly toxic, even to the touch. It literally 'poisoned the wolf' and the balance between using too much or too little was one of the most difficult aspects of the potion. Elizabeth explained it wasn't just a matter of precise measurements; the quantity of Aconite had to be finely adjusted every month against the comparative freshness and slight seasonal variations (and in some cases gender) of all the other ingredients. The correct balance could be discerned by factors such as smell, colour, consistency, and, somewhat alarmingly as far as Harry was concerned, taste.

Harry carefully examined the purple-flowered herb. It even *looked* sinister. It had long claw-like leaves and flowers that were hooded over, reminding Harry of a Dementor. Elizabeth carefully demonstrated methods for cutting up the herb. Every component of the plant would be used in the potion and each part had to be prepared in different ways — all with scrupulously clean silver knives, silver mortars, and silver pestles.

It was late in the day when she declared their potions ready for testing. She checked her own first, and then Harry watched anxiously whilst she examined every aspect of his trial batch. He held his breath when his godmother took a minute taste and was mightily relieved when she didn't drop dead.

"There might be just a touch too much powdered Bat Dung," she said, "but that won't affect the viability of the potion." She took another minute taste and nodded approvingly. "It's really very good, Harry."

"I just followed everything you did," Harry said, trying not to look as relieved as he felt.

Elizabeth seemed lighter and happier, too, now the potions were done. Harry stayed to help clean up then watched curiously as she set up a row of test tubes. She explained that since her cauldron would be plenty for Remus, she planned to do a spot of experimenting with Harry's. She was trying to improve the taste since the gag reflex was too overpowering for some of the weakest werewolves. She laid out new ingredients (most of which Harry didn't even recognise) and started filling a row of test tubes using his spare batch. Together, they crushed, sliced, and ground the new ingredients and then Elizabeth started experimenting. She would add a little of the test ingredient to a tube then take a tiny sip to taste, with Harry keeping notes of the results.

"Ugh," she shuddered, "you can cross off Juice of Monkey Brains."

Harry grimaced sympathetically as Elizabeth gargled with water from her wand and spat into the sink.

"How do you know the new ingredient won't ruin the potion?" he asked curiously.

"You don't," sighed Elizabeth, "not for certain — that would be the next stage. Right now, I'm just trying to establish if the ingredients — or combinations of ingredients — might *potentially* improve the taste."

Harry eyed the two smoking cauldrons; the contents did smell foul. "How much of it does Remus need to drink each month?"

"Too much," said a wry voice from the doorway. Returned from tending his orchids in London, Remus strolled into the workroom and winced at the sight of *two* cauldrons. "I appreciate you making it for me, Lizzie, but I don't need quite that much ..."

Elizabeth smiled and held up a spoon. "Actually, Harry made a batch for practice. See if you can tell which is which."

Remus winced a little but accepted the challenge. He sniffed both batches carefully then tasted a small spoonful from the first. He shuddered and said, "Disgusting." He took a taste from the second cauldron and was silent a moment.

"Equally disgusting," he said, then regarded Harry intently, as if reading his mind, "but I would have to say — Harry."

Harry groaned then laughed in frustration. "How could you tell?"

"Tastes like Snape made it," Remus replied lightly. He screwed up his nose and peered over Harry's shoulder. "That's not Monkey Brains, is it? No, don't tell me, I don't think I want to know."

"Wimp," Elizabeth said, chuckling softly as she sprinkled a desiccated jellyfish into the next test tube. She twirled the smoking tube three times then took a tiny sip.

Alarmed, Remus snatched the tube from her hand. "What are you doing?! *That's poison!*"

Startled, Elizabeth said, "Of course it's poison — but this piddling amount isn't going to kill me."

"You don't know that!" shot Remus, his knuckles white around the tube.

"Actually, I *do* know that," Elizabeth corrected him archly. "I know *exactly* what's in it."

"Why are you drinking it then?"

Harry had rarely seen his guardian looking so rattled. Elizabeth's expression softened.

"Remy, it's fine," she said soothingly. "I'm just trying to improve the taste."

"It tastes perfectly fine," he declared. "Just leave it be, Elizabeth!"

"I'm right in the middle of —" started Elizabeth.

"Use me to taste it then."

"Don't be silly. You already drink enough of it as it is; you don't need to be taking experimental doses on top of that."

"I can taste it for you," offered Harry.

"No!" said Elizabeth quickly.

Victorious, Remus declared, "If it's so safe, why don't you want Harry tasting it?"

"Harry's body is still recuperating," Elizabeth countered swiftly. "There's no telling what affect even a small dose of Wolfsbane might have when combined with all the other medications he's taking."

"Just leave it alone, Elizabeth," Remus commanded, as if that was that.

"You're not the only one who uses this potion, you know," said Elizabeth, bristling. "A lot of people rely on me to —"

Remus's jaw set stubbornly. "I forbid you to —"

"I beg your pardon!" Elizabeth snapped incredulously. "Just who the hell do you think you are, telling me what I can and cannot do?"

Remus opened his mouth to speak, and by the look on his face Harry was pretty sure the wrong answer was about to come out. Remus seemed to come to the same conclusion just in time and shut his mouth again. His expression softened and he drew closer to Elizabeth and stroked the inside of her arm.

"Lizzie, please," he begged in a whisper, "just leave it be for now."

Elizabeth stared up at him with huge eyes and nodded slightly. Looking between the two adults, Harry suddenly felt very much like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"Er, why don't I ..." he murmured, "um ... I might go see what Natalie's up to."

Harry escaped and headed towards the Grand Salon. Natalie wasn't there, but he heard music and followed the sound down into the Roman Bathhouse. He gaped in open-mouthed horror at the sight before him.

"Hey," said Natalie brightly.

Wearing her sky-blue bikini, the girl was lying flat on her stomach on one of the massage tables, reading a comic book. The twelve-inch tall Celine Dion wailing from Natalie's mini music-box was disturbing enough, but crawling all over Natalie's body were at least a dozen severed hands. Each one was kneading and stretching the muscles in her back, legs, arms, neck — there was even one massaging her scalp.

Natalie laughed out loud. "Oh my God, you should see your face! What? Haven't you ever used Magic Fingers before?"

Before long Harry was stripped to the waist, lying face down on a table next to Natalie and feeling decidedly at peace with the world as a dozen hands worked him over.

"How do you think it's going?" asked Natalie.

"Really good," Harry said dreamily.

"Not that," chided Natalie, "*Lupercalia!*"

"Huh?" murmured Harry drowsily. "Oh ... um, yeah ..."

The Magic Fingers were busy on Harry's back, and all other thoughts just slid from his mind.

"Harry?" prompted Natalie. "Auntie Lizzie, Uncle Remus — where are they?"

"Oh, um, they're in the potions thing — house — whatever," mumbled Harry sleepily. "He's worried she'll poison herself ..."

"Poison herself?" repeated Natalie. "She's not experimenting again?"

"Huh? Yeah, experimenting," Harry agreed dreamily, arching his neck to give the Magic Fingers better access. "These hands are wicked."

Natalie was silent awhile then said, "It wouldn't be the first time you know."

"Hmmm?" murmured Harry.

"She got really sick one time from spagyric experimentation."

"Hmmm," agreed Harry. Then he twisted his head around to face Natalie. "Sorry?"

"About five years ago," said Natalie. "She got really sick when she was testing the Wolfsbane Potion on herself. Said she couldn't risk trying it

on anybody else until she'd tested it on at least one human first."

"Whoa," breathed Harry. "But she got better?"

"Touch and go for a bit," said Natalie, "but yeah, she was okay. But the potion needed a lot of fine tuning. She got some help testing it."

"Yeah? What, with other werewolves," guessed Harry.

"Nah," said Natalie. "Not until later, anyway. She had a friend who helped her. He was a vampire, so the potion wasn't going to kill him. He helped her get past a few problems."

"She's friends with a vampire?" said Harry.

"They're not *all* bad," Natalie said defensively. "Not any more than werewolves are."

"Sorry, didn't mean anything," apologised Harry and the girl fell silent. "Look," he offered, "I wouldn't worry; I think Remus convinced your aunt to lay off the experimenting for a bit."

Natalie was relieved, but Harry cringed; Celine Dion was back.

On Saturday morning, Day Five of Operation Lupercalia, Natalie and Harry met under the Marble knitting hags. From that crossroads vantage spot, they could keep an eye on the Rose Villa, the Sculpture Studio, and the Grand Salon, as well. The views were dazzling but their hopes dim. The Lupins seemed to have fallen into some kind of limbo. Both adults were extremely pleasant to each other, but nothing useful was happening on the romance front that Harry and Natalie could see, just lots of sneaking looks when the other person wasn't looking; hardly the stuff of igniting flaming passions.

"We have to do *something*!" groaned Natalie. "I can't get two sensible words out of my aunt these days. If this keeps up —"

Natalie broke off and yanked Harry out of sight. Elizabeth was knocking on Remus's bedroom door down in the Rose Villa. Remus, looking dishevelled from a nap, answered the door and accepted a smoking goblet. He stepped forward a little, but Elizabeth was already backing away. Remus stood in the doorway, watching his wife race away in the direction of the Chat Room. He kept watching until she was out of sight then retreated into his room. Harry and Natalie exchanged long-suffering groans. It was clearly time for Plan B.

"Has to be tonight," Harry decided. "Full moon's due next Friday. Remus'll start getting pretty weak in a few days time."

"I'm game," agreed Natalie.

Plan B required a candlelit dinner in the Grand Salon; they figured the shiny marble floors would be excellent for dancing. Natalie offered the use of her mini music-box. Harry only agreed after he'd checked what other artists she had. Lovey and Dovey were beside themselves with joy when Master Harry asked for their help with their secret operation, enthusiastically taking over all the finer details of the feast whilst Harry and Natalie focused on strategy (and ate far too many of Lovey's delicious blueberry and banana muffins).

"It can't be a dinner for two," Harry argued, "way too obvious."

"Okay, but we'll need to get them up dancing," Natalie said musingly, "then we can disappear."

"Sounds good," agreed Harry.

"We'll have to get up and dance first," Natalie decided, adding the item to her to do list.

"I can't dance," Harry said flatly.

"Perfect!" Natalie declared happily. "Neither can I."

Elizabeth was just getting ready for dinner that evening when her niece stopped by. Natalie flopped onto her bed and helped herself to some strawberry chocolates (they were delicious, but because they were only conjured food, they magically vanished after a while without leaving any troublesome calories behind).

"You are *not* wearing that!" Natalie declared through a mouthful of chocolate.

Elizabeth frowned down at her simple cream robes. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"You look like a nun," Natalie said bluntly.

Elizabeth stiffened. "I do *not* look like a nun."

"How about that red cocktail dress you look so good in?" Natalie said, turning on the charm. "You know, the one with the shoestring straps that's all kind of — you know — twirly when you walk?"

"A bit dressy for a family dinner, darling," said Elizabeth.

"Uncle Remus is getting dressed up," Natalie noted blithely.

Harry made a quick trip back to Grimmauld Place to dress for dinner. Well, he tried to make it quick; he was delayed by an argument that had broken out in the Chat Room between Nicolas Flamel and Paracelsus on the creation of artificial life (Paracelsus was for, Flamel against). Most of the busts were feigning sleep to avoid the argument, which was quickly degenerating into a Franco-Swiss war. Each side leapt at the chance for 'fresh blood', trying to persuade 'this fine young man' to support *their* point of view. Harry was saved by Perenelle Flamel, who distracted her husband and the Ponce of Potions long enough for Harry to escape through the grandfather clock.

Back home in his bedroom, Harry laid out new chocolate-coloured trousers and a crisp cream dress shirt Susan had picked out for him at Harrods. As he was dressing, his scar started acting up a bit. Remus had been bringing the *Daily Prophet* to breakfast each day, but there was still no news of Voldemort. Harry didn't know if this was a good sign or a bad sign, but he wasn't going to waste time thinking about something he couldn't control. He just grabbed a pair of Sirius's cufflinks and dashed back through the grandfather clock (flying through the Chat Room before anyone could suck him into another argument). Down the hill, he stopped by Remus's bedroom to look his scruffy guardian up and down disapprovingly.

"You do know the girls are getting dressed up tonight?" he said archly.

The elves had surpassed themselves. The piano end of the Grand Salon had been transformed into a romantically lit ballroom, filled with candles and beautiful flowers. The furniture and rugs had been cleared away and a table set for four was laid under a sea of twinkling fairy lights. Twelve-inch high musicians played soft jazz from the top of the piano (Harry, with Frank's help, was keeping Natalie well away from her music box).

Remus and Elizabeth had also done the teens proud. Elizabeth was wearing a flimsy red dress and her hair had somehow gone from dead straight to a pile of blonde curls that bounced when she laughed (Harry suspected a *Curling Potion*). On her feet were strappy red shoes with heels so high Harry privately wondered how she could even walk let alone dance in them. Around her neck hung a ruby necklace, and her lips were very red, too. Remus had also scrubbed up nicely, wearing clothes hand-picked by Fleur Delacour: dark-blue pleated trousers and a lavender shirt. Remus inspected the Grand Salon admiringly, not missing the dance floor.

"Someone's been busy," he said casually.

"Oh, yeah," Harry returned easily, "well, you know Lovey and Dovey — any excuse for a do."

Remus smiled and pulled out Elizabeth's seat for her. "You're looking especially lovely this evening, Elizabeth."

"Thank you, you're looking rather handsome yourself."

Dinner went very smoothly. Everyone was in good spirits, joking and laughing.

"Auntie Lizzie," Natalie said sweetly over dessert, "Harry was hoping you could give him some dance tips."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow to Harry.

"I'm really rubbish," he recited flatly.

"I'm sure that's not true," Elizabeth chided him warmly, "but I'd be delighted."

Remus manned the music box. He even managed to extract a miniature Sinatra (much to Frank, the python's, delight). The Voice strutted across the top of the piano shaking out his arms and stretching his fingers; he looked very happy to get out of the box.

"Right," said Elizabeth, standing beside Harry. "This is a simple box step. Forward with your left foot ... to the side with your right ... and together. Back with your right ... to the side with your left ... and together. See how you start and stop on the same spot?"

Elizabeth made Harry practice several times before facing him head on. Wandless, she stared down at her red-painted toes.

"Hang on a tick," she whispered and skipped over to Remus for a quick Shield Charm on her toes.

Both of the Franks snickered and Natalie collapsed into giggles. Harry glared at the girl and tipped his head meaningfully towards Remus. Natalie just grinned and mouthed, 'Soon.'

Harry managed to make a genuine mess of things, and after twenty minutes of triple steps, rock steps, and a clumsy attempt at swing, he was able to plead for Remus to demonstrate with Natalie what on earth he was supposed to be doing. Harry watched with great satisfaction as Natalie stumbled and tripped through the same moves as him. Before long, the teens were able to legitimately beg for their elders to show them how it was done.

Whilst Sinatra crooned, Elizabeth and Remus glided effortlessly around the Grand Salon. Immensely pleased with themselves, Harry and Natalie sat back down and got stuck into their just and delicious desserts. At first, the Lupins kept stopping to explain what they were doing for the teenagers, but soon they forgot all about them (which suited Harry and Natalie just fine). Dovey took control of the music box, and Lovey kept finding excuses to linger under a potted palm, staring dreamily out onto the dance floor. By the time the big band song, *Sway With Me*, started,

Remus and Elizabeth only had eyes for each other. Remus's hands kept skimming across Elizabeth's stomach, barely touching, then he'd spin her away only to snap her tight into his body with a jolt, her twirling red skirt wrapping around his legs for a beat — then they'd be moving again, their bodies so close it was as if only one person was spinning around the dance floor.

Her chocolate mousse melting, Natalie plucked a palm frond from the centrepiece and fanned herself. Harry felt a tad hot under the collar, himself. He turned to Natalie and managed to croak, "Fancy a swim?"

With a brief scraping of chairs on hard marble, the teens were gone.

Standing on tiptoe, Elizabeth leaned into Remus's cheek as they slow danced to Celestina Warbeck singing *Dream a Little Dream of Me*. The warmth of Remus's body easily penetrated flimsy chiffon, sending shivers through her. The kids had abandoned them long ago and Elizabeth decided to do the same with her pride. She closed her eyes and slid across Remus's smooth shaven cheek, kissing him softly, tentatively. Remus immediately and tenderly returned the kiss. Elizabeth's legs jellied as the kiss lengthened.

Stars shining bright above you

Night breezes seem to whisper, "I love you"

Birds singin' in the sycamore trees

Dream a little dream of me

Remus pulled Elizabeth into him and buried his face in her neck. "I love you, Lizzie. I've missed you so."

A long happy hiss sounded from the piano and a fresh rush of emotion surged through Elizabeth. She wanted to laugh and cry and punch her husband but instead clutched him tightly and choked out, "I love you, too, you idiot."

If Remus objected to being called an idiot, he gave no sign. The music played on, but the Lupins were oblivious. Abandoning the pretence of dancing, their embrace grew steamier. Still kissing him, she pulled at his shirt, tugging him towards the French doors.

"Lizzie — Lizzie, wait," he begged when they reached the steps outside. "We need to talk."

"Talk — bad," she said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again; she knew he wanted her, too.

"Lizzie, *please* ." Breathing hard, he pulled away and held her at arms' length, his face pale under the waxing half-moon.

"Wh — what?" she stammered.

Remus just took her hand and led her down the path. Dazed, Elizabeth followed him to their villa and into her dimly lit bedroom, where she was sat soberly on the bed and he started pacing. Elizabeth's brain didn't seem to want to work; this wasn't what was supposed to be happening.

"Lizzie," Remus said hoarsely, kneeling before her, "there's something I need to tell you, something I couldn't tell you in the Black Forest." He reached up to tenderly cup her cheek. A Dementor-like chill spread over Elizabeth at the look of pain in his eyes. "There was a second part to the prophecy. Not only will I bite you, but you'll ... Lizzie, you will kill our son."

"N-No!" she gasped in horror. "It c-can't be — I don't — no! Tell me exactly what she said!" she demanded tremulously. "*Tell me!*"

Stricken, Remus recited, "A longed for son — born of love's labour ... the flaxen-haired beauty brings death to the precious child ..."

Elizabeth couldn't breathe. Remus wrapped her in his arms, begging her to forgive him. Her body shook with sobs as he held her tightly to him, she didn't know how long.

"Is that it?" she said bleakly when her tears abated. "Is there anything else?"

Remus shook his head miserably and Elizabeth went to the bathroom to blow her nose and wash her face. Back on the bed, they talked past three in the morning, pouring out their hearts — all their hopes and fears — to each other. Everything kept circling back to the prophecy, but Elizabeth had no tears left. She could only think of how much they'd already given up — how much *more* they were willing to surrender — in trying to deny the hand of fate. Her fantasies of a future including children lay in ruins, but she refused to have her life dictated to any longer by that wretched prophecy.

"Enough," she said defiantly to herself as much as Remus.

Something happened in that moment that Elizabeth couldn't quite define. She only knew she wasn't going to be beaten by some Hogwarts hag who decided that Elizabeth Sabine Lupin was fated to turn into some kind of murdereress.

"If we can't have children, so be it," she argued, but that didn't mean that they couldn't share their lives. They hadn't come so far, and gone through so much, to give up now, she insisted. She took her husband's hands and stared at his ring-less fingers.

"We're better than this," she declared forcefully, though her voice shook a little. "I'm not going to give away another *minute* of my life to some blasted prophecy! This ends — right now!"

"Lizzie ..." rasped Remus.

"Where's your ring?" Elizabeth challenged him.

Remus froze for a moment then slid a hand deep into his trouser pocket, retrieving a scrap of doubly folded-over leather that was shiny and worn with years of rubbing. A circular impression betrayed its contents. Remus unfolded the worn leather and held his palm open to her. The terrible weight in her chest lifted as she gazed at the gleaming gold band she'd chosen for him some fourteen years earlier, leaving her feeling light-headed, giddy even. This man, this love, he was everything she needed — children or not. He was hers and she was *never* giving him up again.

She picked up the band and took her husband's slightly shaking left hand in her own. She was about to put it on his finger, but then stopped and looked around, racking her muddled brains.

"Remy ..." she started apologetically, "... I don't ..."

The colour drained from Remus's face.

"I understand —" he started to say.

Elizabeth quickly cut him off. "No — no — no! It's just I — I don't know where mine is."

Remus laughed with relief. He shook his head and tried to say that it didn't matter, but Elizabeth jumped off the bed, still in her red stilettos, and tripped giddily around the room. Remus stumbled after her, trying ineffectually to help.

"I know it's here somewhere," she muttered, summoning things willy-nilly.

Remus ducked and laughed as clothes, hats, shoes, books, make-up bags, and fat blocks of strawberry chocolates went zooming around the room.

"Bugger!" Elizabeth cried impatiently. "Evil! Wedding ring!"

The golden feline leapt into action, dashing into the villa's shared bathroom. Elizabeth and Remus tumbled after him, laughing and tripping over the obstacle course she'd made. Evil pawed at the silk robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. In the dark, Elizabeth fished around in the pocket and, sure enough, pulled out a long gold chain. In the cold bathroom, her trembling fingers fumbled with the chain's clasp and she stomped her foot in frustration. Remus took the chain from her and almost ripped the ring off. The pair stood still a moment, breathing hard, staring into each other's shadowy faces.

"Are you sure about this, Lizzie?" Remus said throatily.

"Not even close," she replied. "You?"

"Scared as hell," rasped Remus.

"We're agreed then," she said breathlessly. "Has to be a good sign, don't you think?"

Remus waved a hand to the dozens of charmed niches in the walls, filling the bathroom with flickering candlelight. He tilted her face to the light and searched her eyes then let out a shuddering sigh of relief. Taking her left hand, he kissed her gold filigree ring to his lips, and slid it onto her finger.

"With all my heart, my soul, my life," he recited huskily.

Blinking back fresh tears, Elizabeth kissed his ring to her lips then slid it onto his finger and repeated their wedding vow, "With all my heart, my soul, my life."

Remus pulled her into him and kissed her deeply.

"I love you, Elizabeth," he rasped, holding onto her as if he would never let her go again.

Tears spilled down Elizabeth's cheeks, but she was smiling. She tried to tell him she loved him, too, but she was hiccoughing too much to make any sense. Remus kissed her, tears, hiccups, and all. Grabbing some tissues, he led her back to the bed and tenderly dried her face whilst she cried like an idiot into his chest. Making her lie down, he removed her shoes then his own and spooned around her, holding her close until her hiccoughs subsided.

Elizabeth woke before dawn, startled to find herself inside someone's arms. Then everything came flooding back and she smiled sleepily at the glints of gold on their fingers. She gingerly moved his hand from around her stomach and sat up on the edge of the bed. She unpinned her messy blonde curls so they tumbled loose around her shoulders. Then she started shedding her clothes and jewellery — everything except her wedding ring. Elizabeth was just reaching up to unclasp her ruby necklace when she felt a fingertip tracing the curve of her back, sending goose pimples shivering across her skin. Looking over her shoulder, she found a pair of smouldering grey eyes drinking her in.

Elizabeth stretched cat-like across her husband and purred, "One of us is just dreadfully overdressed."

"It's a nice ruby," Remus agreed huskily.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter 26 – Guardian Demons

Lunchtime came and went and still there was no sign of the Lupins. Two cupids hid behind the Divine Spinners of Destiny, twiddling their thumbs and arguing as to which of them should see if they were okay.

“You were all for spying on them before,” Harry hissed in complaint.

“That was before ...” Natalie hissed back. “Look, I hardly know Uncle Remus any more.”

“I hardly know Elizabeth!”

The knitting hags hushed the bickering teens. “Look,” one of them cackled.

Elizabeth and Remus emerged from Elizabeth’s room, blinking into the sunshine and smiling dreamily at each other. Dressed for swimming, they strolled off, arm in arm. Swagging after them, his tufted tail high in the air, was a decidedly smug Kneazle. Natalie gleefully pummelled her fists into the grass. Harry found himself grinning rather stupidly, too. He’d never seen Remus looking so relaxed and happy. Natalie jumped up to follow them. Harry pulled her right back down.

“Not a good idea,” he said knowingly. “Come on, let’s go for a fly. *Far side of the island!*”

Over their Sunday evening roast, Natalie and Harry acted all innocent, letting the Lupins tie themselves in awkward knots trying to explain what was going on. For two savvy adults it took them a tragically long time to realise they were being had.

“Harry and I just *knew* we had to get you up dancing!” she crowed gaily and started proudly boasting of Operation Lupercalia.

“So, let me get this straight,” Remus checked, looking hard at Harry, who swallowed nervously, “all this week you two have been trying to stay out of our hair to give us a chance to talk. And you dreamed up that feast last night, but you didn’t really want to learn to dance — you just wanted to get us up in the hope something might happen?”

Harry nodded feebly. Then sweet relief washed over him when Remus’s eyes crinkled with amusement.

“Did you really have to call it ‘Operation Lupercalia’?” he complained. Natalie giggled happily. Remus shook his head wryly and turned to his wife, whose hand he kissed before observing, “That deserves *some* kind of punishment, don’t you think, my love?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Elizabeth agreed dutifully. “Something appropriately dire: ballroom dancing lessons, perhaps?”

Remus chuckled approvingly. Harry’s moodstone was suddenly blushing as pink as his cheeks. Seriously, he didn’t deserve that!

Their matchmaking duty done, Harry and Natalie were both looking forward to Ron’s escape from Auntie Muriel, though his arrival on Black Island was carefully staged to let Natalie believe he was travelling via International Portkey to Sicily, just as she had. The first order of business for the three teens was to tear around the island on their broomsticks, laughing and racing at speed through the jungle and waterfalls and beaches. Things went less smoothly when they changed to go swimming.

“What do you reckon?” Ron asked Harry nervously.

Standing in the second bedroom of their bungalow, Harry did his best to smile encouragingly. Under one arm, Ron held his Cleansweep racing broom and under the other he clutched a Donald Duck floatie. But it wasn’t the duck that had Harry stumped, it was what his best mate was wearing — something Harry had only ever seen fleetingly in old silent movies: a saggy, baggy, neck-to-knee bathing costume.

“It’s pants!” declared Ron.

“No, it’s good,” Harry lied bravely. “Um ... you don’t see them much anymore ...”

“Mum got ‘em from Uncle Bilius,” Ron said hopelessly.

“I thought he was dead,” said Harry.

“He is,” Ron said shortly. “Why does everything I own have to be such rubbish?”

“It’s a nice broom,” Harry offered fairly.

“Natalie’s gonna think I’m a complete idiot,” Ron moaned. Harry couldn’t really argue with that.

“Well, you probably don’t need the floatie,” he said, reaching for it. Horrified, Ron clutched Donald tightly to his chest. “Okay, okay,” Harry agreed, holding up his hands and backing away from the duck.

Ron had been a bit thingy about the water ever since he was used as a hostage in the slimy depths of Hogwarts Lake. Harry’s sympathy was limited: Ron had been asleep the whole time. His clothing problem was another matter entirely and something Harry had a great deal more

empathy for.

"Maybe you could cut them off at the waist?" he suggested. "Then they'd be like shorts ..." He winced a little. "There's nothing to hold them up, though ..."

"They weigh a ton when they're wet," fretted Ron.

"Maybe we could get some rope ..." Harry suggested dubiously. "Or braces, maybe ..."

"Where d'you get *your* gear?" asked Ron. Harry looked down at his long green and blue surf shorts and brightened. Elizabeth bought bags of stuff for him from Selfridges.

Resolving Ron's clothing crisis was just the start; Ron flatly refused to go anywhere near the snake pool, even though Harry promised they only called it that because of its serpentine shape. Well, that and the huge cobra's head fountain down the far end. The fountain had great fangs and a forked tongue that snapped and jabbed at you if you swam too close. The lake was also out, so that left the beach, where Harry tried to interest Ron in Gillyweed. Ron declined, opting instead for the safety of his duck floatie.

Still hankering to get some blood pumping, Harry's grand plans for island adventures with his best mate were dealt a fatal blow when Ron saw Natalie in her sky-blue bikini. Even worse, and for some reason Harry couldn't begin to fathom, Natalie found Donald Duck wonderfully endearing. Ron bobbed around happily, his eyes glued to the blonde witch's curves (with the result that very few words coming out of his mouth made any sense whatsoever). Natalie didn't seem to mind. Harry was rather dirty about that. Only the night before in the pool she'd told him off in no uncertain terms for his innocently wandering eyes. Seriously, as if a bloke could help looking! Of course, Natalie's testiness might have had something to do with finding a certain blinking green eye in her bedroom. Harry had smiled feebly and quickly retrieved his Snaparazzi 630 camera (and made a concerted effort from then on to keep it out of range of Natalie's Beater's Bat).

Already impressed with the island, it was the feast the elves put on that evening that sealed Ron's opinion that Black Island was paradise on earth.

"Guess what?" he said cheerfully after his third lobster. "Bill and Fleur — they got engaged!"

Hearty congratulations bubbled around the table.

"That's wonderful news, Ron," Remus said, raising his goblet. "We should have a toast ..."

At bedtime, Harry and Ron abandoned all thoughts of sleep and strolled down the starlit beach in their pyjamas, clambering over the rocks to get to the main beach. Frank was sleeping, leaving Cho2 free to waddle pigeon-toed after them in the dark.

"So, you doing okay?" Ron asked Harry as the three of them kicked at the water's edge.

"Sure," Harry said dismissively.

"Really?" countered Ron.

It had been two weeks since the accident and though Harry knew he wasn't yet at full strength, he wasn't about to admit it.

"Race you," he said, and in a flash their bare feet were pounding across the sand to the far end of the beach. Ron won easily. Harry collapsed in a heap at his feet.

"Didn't think so," Ron said archly.

He flopped down beside Harry and played with the hermit crabs scuttling in and out of their tiny holes, letting Harry get his breath back before asking about Snape and the inquest. This suited Harry just fine; he'd been just itching to tell someone all about it.

"Remus punched him out? *Brilliant!*" Ron crowed.

"Elizabeth had a piece of him as well," Harry said.

He brought Ron up to date with everything that had been going on, including one Severus Snape having to be on his best behaviour until Halloween, and Remus and Elizabeth being back together for good. Ron was an excellent audience, gasping and laughing in all the right places, and it was past three in the morning before either of them knew it.

"It's going pretty good, then, with you and Remus?" prompted Ron.

Harry stared out into the calm black sea, at the little frills of white on the tiny waves. "Yeah. I mean, I miss Snuffles like anything, but with Remus ... I mean, it's different, but it's good. It's almost like having my own dad back, you know?"

Ron just smiled; he knew how much dads meant.

After Ron's arrival, and in the days following, Harry discovered what it felt like to play second fiddle to a girl. And he didn't like it one bit. He had to think about it, but he did quietly warn Ron about the Chastity Beads in the Torture Palace. Ron was duly grateful and steered well-clear of the place, and so the three teens hung out in the boys' bungalow with Hedwig, Pigwidgeon, Frank, Cho2, Mirabella, and Bruce. Harry didn't think Ron had

tried to kiss Natalie yet, but it was surely only a matter of time — the redhead was completely smitten. Still, Harry thought it'd be a tricky manoeuvre wearing a duck.

The day before the full moon, Harry encouraged Natalie and Ron to go swimming without him, preferring to stay close to his werewolf, who was happy enough right now to do little more than nap in the cushioned cane chairs on the terrace and take quiet strolls with Elizabeth down to Cupid's fountain. Cupid himself had last been spotted down at the beach, his golden arrow pointing longingly at a certain inflatable duck.

Remus had the same grey and exhausted look about him he always got when the full moon was near, like something was sucking the life out of him; not unexpected, especially considering all the poison he was taking, but not pleasant to watch. Sitting on the terrace, Elizabeth kept up a steady stream of nervous chatter about nothing.

"Lizzie," Remus said, "why don't you go see what Natalie's up to?" Elizabeth started to demur, but Remus just squeezed her hand and murmured, "I'm fine ... please."

Elizabeth tenderly kissed his cheek and said she'd bring back some of his potion on her return.

"I shall look forward to your return in spite of that," Remus assured her solemnly.

Elizabeth laughed and rewarded him with a firm kiss on the lips. Remus smiled at her, but a pained expression took hold as he watched her disappearing down the garden path. Harry could see how much it tore him up for his wife to see him like this — not to mention the wretched anticipation about the prophecy building up inside him like a volcano ready to blow.

"Harry, there's something I'd like to ask you ..." Remus started hesitantly. "I'll understand if you'd rather not ..." Harry sat forward attentively. "I can't stay here — today, I mean — the anticipation's killing me, but Elizabeth will want me to. She worries, you see ... she ..." Remus shook his head fitfully, but Harry didn't need him to say it.

"You want me to go back home with you," he stated simply. "So she won't worry you're not eating and stuff. Sure. No problem."

Remus opened his mouth to speak then shut it again.

"I'll just get Frank and Hedwig," Harry said, jumping to his feet. Remus caught his arm as he passed.

"Thank you, Harry," he said hoarsely.

Elizabeth wasn't wild about the idea but eventually agreed to Remus and Harry leaving together. She insisted on going with them, though, to make sure their various potions were transported safely and that the Black House kitchen was well-stocked with food for the next few days. When it was time to say goodbye, Elizabeth lingered in front of the grandfather clock, nervously and unnecessarily listing things Harry should and shouldn't do if anything went wrong.

"We'll be fine, Elizabeth," pleaded Harry. "We have done this before, you know." Harry elected not to mention that during the last full moon he scored a black eye from Snape, and Remus nearly sent him packing back to Privet Drive. Elizabeth nodded distractedly.

"Right — of course — but you should know the poison weakens him terribly before his demon consumes it."

"Lizzie, enough ..." Remus said weakly, holding her close, "enough, sweetheart."

Harry suddenly found the view of dingy Grimmauld Place intensely fascinating.

Staring into the weedy square, he frowned on seeing several familiar figures walking towards the house. It turned out the Order was meeting that day to exchange notes on the search for Voldemort's lair. Given his unique involvement, Harry was permitted to attend the meeting. Unfortunately, no one had yet found a town that matched his description exactly. Wizarding Tourism pamphlets were spread all over the table. Harry looked through all of them, but saw nothing that jogged his memory. Meanwhile, Remus was fading fast.

"And you're sure there was a church?" pressed Kingsley. "Harry?"

"What?" Harry said distractedly. "Sorry, yeah, there was definitely a church." His scar stung just thinking about it. "Sorry," he said, rubbing his head, "I don't remember too much, but I think there could be a crypt underneath it."

Kingsley nodded politely, but Harry got the distinct impression that he (and quite a few of the other members) considered the search a wild goose chase. Given what happened the last time he reported a vision, Harry couldn't really blame them. Feeling all eyes on him, he went through all the pamphlets again, but a small part of him was secretly relieved they'd not found Voldemort; he knew he was nowhere near ready to fulfil his prophecy.

Remus was very quiet at dinner, staring at the kitchen door and jumping whenever Harry asked him a question.

"She's not coming back, you know," Harry offered quietly.

"I know," admitted Remus. He hesitated a moment then added, "I'm as worried I'll go back. It's very strong, the need to be with your mate."

Harry didn't know what to say to that so he forced a laugh and said, "You'll have to get through me first." Remus choked on a carrot and Harry grinned. "I mean, seriously, look at you. *Hermione* could bowl you over right now."

Remus chuckled throatily. "I imagine she could."

After dinner, they retired to the library, far from the grandfather clock. For a little light reading, Harry flicked through a book on death: *So Hard to Say Goodbye*, by Ezeriah Puddifoot, which recounted people using Mr Puddifoot to channel those who had gone 'beyond' (Mr Puddifoot assured his readers he charged only the most modest of fees). The book was full of tragic love stories and gullible witches and wizards, such as the woeful tale of Mabel from Quorn, whose childhood sweetheart, Rupert, had died on a vampire hunt. Apparently, Rupert had managed to stake himself in a tragic misunderstanding over which was the business end of 'Mr Pointy'.

"I told her," Remus said hoarsely, and Harry looked up. "The rest of the prophecy. She had to know." Harry nodded slightly, waiting, but Remus struggled to find the words he needed. "I want to tell you about it, Harry, it's just ..."

Although burning with curiosity, Harry said, "It's okay; it's none of my business."

"Yes, it is," said Remus.

Harry did not like the sound of that. "What — is it about me?"

"No, nothing like that, but you're part of my family now. Elizabeth and I want you to know what's going on. It's just hard to talk about, that's all."

Harry's heart thudded uneasily. Why couldn't they just make prophecies that you were going to win the lottery?

"Anyway, you know the first part," Remus continued painfully, "that I'll turn her. The second part is worse: Lizzie and I will have a son, but — but they say she'll kill him."

Harry had wondered what could be worse than being bitten; now he knew: murdering your own child?

"I — I'm so sorry," he said uselessly. "I'm sorry ... I ..." Harry shook his head dazedly. He had no words. Words! "What *exactly* did they say? The whole thing!"

Remus hesitated.

"Can't you remember it?" prompted Harry.

"I wish," Remus replied with a strained little laugh. "I've just never spoken the whole thing aloud before ... not even to Lizzie ..." He drew a deep breath and recited his prophecy in full. "One life tormented becomes two ... his precautions matter not, the hooded monk will poison his beloved ... and two becomes three when comes a longed for son — born of love's labour ... the flaxen-haired beauty brings death to the precious child ..."

His heart sinking, Harry made Remus repeat it, which he did.

"And you're the hooded monk ..." he said dully, thinking of how Madam Pomfrey used to smuggle him out of school, and of his usual plain and worn out robes. "And Elizabeth, she's the beauty." Remus nodded sombrely and they sat silently for a time, Harry just turning the prophecy over and over in his mind. "But — but does that mean ... What does that mean for you now? Does it mean you can never ..." Harry felt his face growing warm, "you know ..."

The ghost of a smile flitted across Remus's face.

"Even Muggles have found ways to prevent unwanted pregnancies, Harry," he said kindly. "But I'm begging you, let's save that talk for another day." Harry nodded readily and Remus's smile faded. "What it means is that Elizabeth and I can't risk having children. I've known this for ten years, of course, but Lizzie ... it's very hard for her; she always wanted a family."

"But you're working around it," Harry said anxiously. "You're going to stay together now, aren't you?"

"We'll certainly try," Remus replied with a defeated air. "Who knows what the future might bring?"

"Well, *they* do, don't they?" Harry countered bitterly, whoever *they* were.

"It's going to be okay, son," Remus said. "Lizzie and I — we'll make it work, somehow. Truly."

It wasn't long before he called it a night. Harry shadowed him upstairs, trying to anticipate anything he might need: water, blankets, dog-biscuits

"Thank you," Remus said dryly, heading for Regulus's old bedroom, "but Moony won't be surfacing until tomorrow night. Stop fussing," he said, shooing him off. "Bed. And don't forget to clear your mind."

Harry loitered in the hall awhile outside their bedrooms. Bitten so young, the years, the hundreds of moons, were taking an increasing toll on him, Elizabeth confided to Harry, and Harry went to sleep uneasy that night, trying hard not to think about werewolf life expectancies.

Harry ducked as Natalie bludgeoned a Puffskein straight at him. He dived into the lake, powering through the glassy surface, shattering the mirror into a thousand shards. The shards sped after him, swimming around his blistered body, smothering him, piercing him. This would never do! He couldn't stay in the bath — his time was up! Didn't they realise that? Cho would tell them. Harry could just see her paddling on the surface of the lake. If he could just reach her ...

Stretching, stretching, he grabbed for her feet. Cho took flight, dragging him through the water and into the air, but something was wrong: his fingers — they were falling off! His charred, fingerless, toeless body, plummeted, flailing through the air. He landed next to Cedric on the Quidditch pitch, mangled and broken. Cedric wasn't looking too good, either.

Countless ravens screamed then attacked Harry, savaging his face with beak and talon. Cho, in full Quidditch kit, hurtled towards them, shrieking at them to stop. Peeves fired an inkwell at her, but it missed and hit Katie Bell in the nose. The ravens froze as one then looked hungrily skywards to where blood poured from Katie's nose. They abandoned Harry in a great rush of flapping wings. Katie tried to dodge, tried to escape, but there were too many of them. They were everywhere, blackening the sky. Dying below, Harry watched helplessly as Katie's blood rained on his face. She slipped from her broom and fell, dropping like a stone ... *He couldn't move! He couldn't save her — he couldn't —*

"NO!"

Harry woke, cold with sweat. It was just a nightmare, he kept telling himself, just a nightmare. But he couldn't even attempt to get back to sleep until he'd washed Katie's blood from his perfectly clean face. Hunched over the sink, he tried to get a grip on himself, tried to eject from his mind Katie's ghostly face as the life poured out of her, her blood blackening the grass, her eyes as lifeless and vacant as Cedric's.

"Harry?" prompted a hoarse voice, making him jump. Remus stood behind him in the bathroom mirror, steadying him. "Are you all right? Is it Voldemort?"

"No!" Harry rasped. "Sorry ... no — no ... just a nightmare ... I'm fine — fine — I —"

Remus hushed him and led him back to bed, where he sat with him and poured him some water. He didn't press for details, but Harry blurted everything anyway. As the nightmare spilled breathlessly from him, he felt like something horrible and ugly was draining away, leaving him lighter somehow, though his guardian was looking correspondingly queasy.

"You didn't do your Occlumency meditations tonight, did you?" Remus challenged Harry.

"What do you think it means?" Harry said anxiously. "Why Katie? Do you think it's a vision?"

Remus didn't think so, but he gave the notion serious consideration, analysing each point in turn.

"It's unlikely to be a vision of the future if Cedric was there," he suggested reasonably. "And you say the twins accidentally drained Katie's blood at training last year?"

Harry nodded; the image of her limp, blood-soaked body being flown away by George and Fred had stuck horribly in the back of his mind.

"And in the dream you felt powerless, trapped," Remus continued perceptively, "like in the bath — like with Cedric — like not being able to save Sirius?" Harry nodded miserably. Remus's lined face furrowed. "And Cho was there but she wasn't able to help you this time," he observed thoughtfully, "and no Megaera, either."

"No, no — honest," Harry said. He was suddenly uncomfortably aware of the demon self-portraits hidden beneath his mattress, right beneath where Remus was sitting. Remus was nodding sagely, now, as if something was just clicking into place.

"So, in your dream you felt utterly defenceless," he suggested musingly, "no guardian angels or demons to save you."

Harry said nothing; Remus's assessment was a little too close to the mark.

"Harry, I think your subconscious is using these terrible memories to make you face what's really worrying you ... and I think you know what that is."

Harry threw his head back into his pillows. "I froze," he groaned. "When Voldemort turned up in the Ministry, I just stood there with my eyes shut against the pain. I couldn't move. How can I ever hope to fight him if I can't even move?" he said hopelessly.

"Your eyes were closed?" Remus prompted in an odd voice.

"I'd just cursed Bellatrix Lestrange. We were yelling at each other about the prophecy, and then he arrived and my scar went nuts. I heard him say I was telling the truth about it being smashed. When I opened my eyes, he had his wand on me. I couldn't even move a muscle. He was just about to kill me then Dumbledore arrived. He looked away, and I was able to move again ..." Harry's eyes widened. "Hang on, you don't think ...?"

"He cast a Legilimens Charm on you as soon as he arrived," Remus said, nodding grimly. "Makes perfect sense. Your eyes were closed — he had his wand on you — he kept control of your body with his eye contact afterwards."

Harry's mind reeled. If only he'd just looked away! How many times had Snape warned him about the power of eye contact?!

"You okay?" murmured Remus, feeling Harry's forehead.

"What?" said Harry. "Oh — um, yeah. No, I'm good. I never understood why I just froze like that — I thought ... well ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"You thought it meant you had no hope against him ..." Remus suggested and Harry nodded with relief. He felt so much better. Not happy, exactly, but greatly relieved. Remus glanced at the alarm clock and said, "It's past midnight. Do you think you can get back to sleep?" Harry nodded and Remus regarded him sternly. "I want at least twenty minutes meditation. Right?"

"Yes, Moony," Harry agreed, reaching for his sea-snail mandala disc.

Shutting his eyes, he wriggled deeper under the covers and let his fingers find the familiar spiralling ridges of the disc. Focusing on thoughts of a serenely spinning galaxy, he methodically worked through the names of the constellations and stars as they slowly danced around each other in his mind. By the time he got to the Dog Star, he was deeply sleepy. Sirius transformed into a big black dog chasing its tail ...

Harry drowsily watched Snuffles spinning on the spot ... spinning ... always spinning ...

"So, they'll be back on Saturday?" Natalie checked as she and Ron walked down the hill to the bungalow after dinner.

"That's what Harry said," agreed Ron.

"So, you've got the place all to yourself then," she prompted as they meandered along the edge of the bungalow's snake swimming pool.

Ron made a sound that might have been a yes (or a mouse squeaking — it was hard to tell). Natalie smiled into the torch-lit darkness. The night was deliciously warm and scented with sea salt and tropical flowers, but Ron Weasley was so shy it was almost painful. She'd given him *ample* opportunity but he hadn't so much as tried to hold her hand. It wasn't as if she was looking for some raging love affair, but she wouldn't say no to a little canoodling. He was just so cute and so adorably clueless.

"Warm night," she observed, kicking off her sandals. "Fancy a swim?" Not waiting for an answer she peeled off her clothes, under which was a pink bikini, and dived into the pool. When she surfaced, she squeezed the water from her eyes and found Ron frozen to the spot, right where she'd left him. "Well, come on. What are you waiting for?"

Ron fled.

Natalie waited. And waited. She was just starting to agree with Mirabella that Ron wasn't coming back when he suddenly reappeared. He stood nervously at the edge of the pool wearing a swimsuit and his rather limp, Spello-taped floatie (Cupid had been duck-hunting all afternoon). Natalie giggled under the surface of the water and waded closer.

"Okay," she said wickedly, "you're going to have to choose: me or the duck."

"Harry ..." whispered a boy's voice.

Harry, busily raising snakes and werewolf cubs with Susan Bones, reluctantly regained consciousness. His dream slithered away and he found himself blinking into Ron's, freckled face.

"What ... Huh?" Harry's brain slowly kicked to life and he shook himself awake. It was dark outside; he couldn't have been asleep more than an hour. "What's wrong? Is it Moony?"

"What?" said Ron. "No, no, it's nothing. I mean something, something good."

"Better be good," Harry grumbled darkly, rubbing at his eyes.

"I kissed her," whispered Ron.

Harry had to smile. "About ruddy time. What was it like?"

Ron sighed dreamily. "Wet."

"Go away, Ron."

After insisting Remus sleep in, Harry spent the morning of the full moon hunched over his desk, writing to Hermione. Hedwig hovered over his shoulder, monitoring his progress and just itching to be given something important to do. At last, she flew away with a fat letter full of information about the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry knew Hermione would like that much better than hearing about Quidditch matches or Gillyweed or flying around Black Island. Shaking out his ink-stained fingers, his gaze drifted to a drawing he'd done of his and Susan's hands. She'd been trying to teach him chords on his knuckles. Pulling out his guitar, he copied her fingers from the moving charcoal picture and smiled a rather silly smile on producing a tuneful chord progression. To date, he'd mastered four of her *Fretful Favourites*. He felt a particular affinity for *Where The Bee Sucks, There Suck I*, and cheerily played and sang, "... On a bat's back do I fly, do I fly; On a bat's back do I fly ..."

"Please, not before breakfast," whimpered Frank.

When Remus surfaced, Harry installed him in comfort in the drawing room for the day and kept him well-pumped with coffee, food, and water. In return, Remus tried hard to at least give the appearance of not constantly watching the grandfather clock. Listening to Harry practice on his guitar, he started to genuinely relax and joked it must be 'soothing the savage beast'. Harry started to laugh then stopped when Remus broke into a coughing fit.

"Do you want some more of your Wolfsbane?" Harry asked, hovering attentively.

Slumped on the couch, his brow shining, Remus waved him away. "I should retire soon."

"You don't really need to go up yet, do you?"

"I don't have to, but it helps if I can settle somewhere safe and relax and calm my mind."

Harry nodded understandingly. "And you keep your human mind when you transform?"

"I can, but these days I prefer to let the wolf surface; it's not as if I have my friends with me." A wistful look grew on his face. "I had Padfoot's company all last year ... it makes such a difference."

"What does Moony think about?" asked Harry curiously.

"Oh, nothing too specific. Basic thoughts — emotions, really. Moony feels all the normal things wolves feel: hunger, pain, lust, loneliness. Wolves are pack animals of course; they don't like to be alone. There are wolf colonies in the Black Forest with fascinating social hierarchies, they —"

"Yes, Professor," teased Harry, and Remus chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"So, what are your plans for the evening?" he asked.

"I dunno. Read a bit ... muck around on the guitar. I'll be fine."

"I wish I could listen," Remus said wistfully. Harry had a sudden, brilliant thought; he amazed even himself sometimes.

"I'll be right back!" he said and returned with two Extendible Ears. Remus smiled softly and nodded. Soon, they were settled two floors apart, chatting quietly about nothing in particular, connected by lengths of flesh-coloured string running through the hallways. Harry had been doing most of the talking, but he knew Remus was appreciating the company. Around dinnertime, Harry thought he might have fallen asleep.

"Moony?" he whispered.

There was no answer, but Harry was fine with that — he could hear that Remus's breathing was regular. Quietly disentangling himself from the ear string, Harry went to get his dinner. Afterwards, he pushed the heaviest couch up against the grandfather clock and set himself up for the night with a pillow and a blanket and his wand. If Moony wanted to go roaming for his mate, he was going to have to get past one Harry James Potter — forget the underage magic rule! Harry curled up on the couch with his earpiece back in and read for a while. *Communing With the Dead: They're Not as Gone as You Think* wasn't too bad, but Harry could barely keep his eyes open wading through *Great Astral Explorers of the 12th Century*, by Roland the Rambler. He'd just read the same paragraph three times and still couldn't work out whether 'Baldric' was some kind of spirit guide or a particularly impressive turnip Roland found in the bottom of his vegetable garden.

"Harry ..." Remus rasped in Harry's ear.

Harry set Baldric aside. "I'm here. How are you feeling?"

"Crap," said Remus, but he laughed a little. "Are you in bed yet?"

"Yes, Moony," Harry replied patiently — mostly truthfully. "She's not here, you know."

Remus was silent a moment. "Have you done your Occlumency?"

"Will you *transform* already!"

"Goodnight, son."

"Night, Moony."

A telltale silence fell. Harry was confident Remus had stuffed his ear deep under the mattress again. He tried to read awhile longer, but the combination of Roland's ramblings and the rhythmic tick-tocking and soft musical chimes of the grandfather clock defeated him. He woke abruptly several hours later to find someone chewing his ear.

"Moony?" yawned Harry.

Pitiful whimpers filtered through Harry's earpiece.

"S'okay, Moony," murmured Harry sleepily, though he doubted whether Moony could hear him; the wolf would hardly be wearing an earpiece.

The whimpering stopped. Harry suspected his ear had just been eaten. He fell back to sleep, but his mind stayed awake inside his body. Since leaving hospital, he'd been doing his best to stay in his own head, but he was sorely tempted to check on his demon guardian. Deciding it couldn't hurt to just take a look, he conjured his eagle owl and flew upstairs. They perched indecisively on the balustrade outside Moony's windowless room beneath the attic stairs. As Harry climbed off, the owl faded away and Harry, as if poured from the end of a wand, swelled to normal size. His glowing body lit the hallway and he felt pleasantly warm — like he was standing in sunshine. Gathering his nerve, he slipped through the door to find Moony moping over a pile of ear string (minus the actual ear).

Moony's ears picked up, and he was on his feet, barking a warning. Harry jumped onto the bed. Finding no one, Moony padded around in the

dark, sniffing everything and barking half-heartedly at nothing. He gave a few more barks — just to be sure — before returning to his spot on the floor. Pawing at the ear string, he dragged it protectively under his chest.

Mine.

The word just popped into Harry's head.

"It's okay, Moony," Harry assured him, though he doubted Moony would hear him. "It's okay; I don't want it."

Moony's ears picked up again, but he seemed more curious than alarmed. The longer Harry just sat there on the bed, the more relaxed Moony became.

Friend.

Harry smiled at the wolf even though he knew he was invisible to him. "Friend," he agreed.

Moony visibly relaxed, he even wagged his tail a little, thumping it against the floor — just like Snuffles. Harry slid off the bed and edged closer, tentatively touching the wolf's fur with his luminous fingers. Moony stirred at his touch; he liked it; he wanted more. Harry tried again. Moony growled softly and kept shifting his long snout to wherever Harry's golden touch fell. Emotions Harry didn't care to analyse too much surged through him. He would not lose Moony, too. Holding a hand to Moony's chest, he felt the reassuring rise and fall of the wolf's lungs, felt the wonder of touching another living, breathing creature. Unbidden, rarely admitted hopes and dreams for love and family filled his mind; some were Moony's, most were his. With no body to feel the fatigue of sore knees or pins and needles, time passed very differently, very quickly for Harry. Too quickly. A painful growl startled him from his reverie, and he watched with morbid fascination as Moony transformed back into Remus, slowly and painfully, not quick like Snuffles or Professor McGonagall.

Remus looked around, weak and confused, and rasped, "Lily ...?"

Startled, Harry suddenly realised he shouldn't be there. Remus crawled up onto his saggy old bed and collapsed. Retreating to the drawing room, Harry stared with considerable annoyance at his slumbering body. He didn't seem to have any intention of waking up just yet, and Harry's soul was left to sit glowing on the coffee table, wondering why Remus had thought Lily was in his room. Could Remus sense his mother inside him somehow? It would certainly be tricky asking Remus without revealing what he'd been up to. From what he'd learned at Saint Mungo's, every bit of him was invisibly connected, that even when his soul was out of his body, a little piece of it stayed there, tethering him like the anchor on a ship. In theory it was the same with his mind — his memories and intellect — but in the reverse. Those things stayed in his brains, but a 'piece of his mind' magically travelled with him wherever his soul went. Whoever designed Wizarding humans was dead clever, in Harry's humble opinion.

Looking around, it occurred to him they seemed to have lost a few armchairs — he was sure there used to be more of them. Harry blew out his luminous cheeks, thoroughly bored with watching himself snore. Wandering into the hall, he saw his stiff and sore guardian coming down the stairs, freshly showered and shaved but with a shock of werewolf hair that would have done James Potter proud. Remus checked the kitchen then headed for the drawing room. Harry felt a little guilty when Remus found himself locked out (the Boy-Who-Lived-With-a-Werewolf had found a new use for Tonks's charmed door-bolt).

Remus drew his wand then hesitated and knocked instead. No one home. Harry could've told him that. Opening the door with magic, Remus stopped then chuckled affectionately on seeing his very own guardian angel curled up on the couch in front of the grandfather clock. Harry cringed when he took in the scene from the man's perspective. He'd fallen asleep the night before while reading. His glasses were half-dangling off his face, a book was open in his left hand and in his right was his wand, but just at the moment, it posed a decent chance of blowing off his left nostril. And to top it off, he hadn't taken the time to look too closely at which blanket he'd grabbed. He could have *sworn* it hadn't looked that pink and fluffy last night.

Remus carefully removed Harry's glasses, book, and wand then moved to the piano, where he wrote a quick note. Harry read it over his shoulder.

Gone to see Lizzie, back shortly.

Remus's brow creased and he added:

It's okay — I'm back in human form.

"Right," Remus muttered to himself, "because werewolf penmanship is so good ..."

Harry laughed out loud. Remus's eyes shot up. He looked around, intrigued. Harry held his breath as Remus looked straight through his glowing astral body. Remus's hand inched out and Harry jumped back; he did not want to be caught snooping. Grasping at nothing, Remus shook his head as if he was imagining things then turned back to his note, erasing it and starting again. Back at the grandfather clock, he frowned down at Harry and felt his scarred forehead, then his cheek, then his forehead again, as if checking his temperature. He conjured two extra blankets for him then sent the couch sliding back to the coffee table, dialled the grandfather clock forward to eleven o'clock, and was gone. Left alone to wander the drawing room, Harry idly cast an eye over Remus's second note.

Full moon over now, cub.

Gone to see Lizzie, back shortly.

Thank you — for everything,

Moony.

Harry smiled at Remus's nickname for him. It fit, in a way, because werewolf cubs weren't real — and of course Remus wasn't really his dad. But Harry knew that Remus had been feeling rather fatherly towards him for a while now, ever since the party, really. It hadn't escaped Harry's notice how lonely he'd been before they started living together. Remus had his wife back now, of course, though it was going to be rough for them with their prophecy. It was just really sad they couldn't ever risk having children of their own. If they did have a son, then —

Merlin! Harry's glowing body trembled. *What if ...*

He tried to remember the exact working of the prophecy. They'd have a son — no — no — 'A' son would be born! It could be *anyone's* son! It could be him! And the 'beauty' would bring *death* — well, he *did* die, didn't he! She *did* bring it, even if it *was* an accident! How did the prophecy go again? Harry grabbed for his quill to write it down, but his hand went straight through it. He tried again, but although he could feel the quill, he couldn't make it move at all. *Bugger!* At least under an Invisibility Cloak you could *do* stuff. Harry's mind worked feverishly, struggling to remember exactly what the prophecy said. Finally, he thought he had it right:

One life tormented becomes two ...

His precautions matter not, the hooded monk will poison his beloved ...

And two becomes three when comes a longed for son — born of love's labour ...

The flaxen-haired beauty brings death to the precious child ...

Excited now, Harry systematically ran one scenario after another through his mind. There wasn't too much he could do with the first bit, but the second half was another matter. *He* was the son; he *had* to be! Only one thing ruined his brilliant logic: how could the second half already have happened if the first half hadn't? And he, Harry, was obviously born *sixteen* years ago, six whole years before the prophecy was even made. There must be *something* he was missing.

The grandfather clock clicked open. Harry looked up guiltily as Remus and Elizabeth came through, both of them looking tired but happy. Elizabeth tiptoed to Harry's body on the couch. His eyes were moving beneath his lids, as if he was dreaming. Harry hoped it was a good one.

"Oh, the precious darling!" Elizabeth whispered tenderly. "And you say he stood guard all night?"

Remus faltered and said, "Well ..."

Harry rolled his luminous eyes.

Lovingly, Elizabeth bent low to kiss his scarred forehead, and Harry felt a painful jolt — or his body did. In a flash, his soul was yanked back into his head, and in that moment — in that split instant — he glimpsed blood and writhing serpents, but whatever the dream — or nightmare — was, it vanished, and he woke to see his godmother smiling down at him.

"We've got waffles."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Awakenings

Chapter-27 – The One

Returning to Black Island, Harry hoped to drag his best mate away from Natalie long enough to do a bit of exploring in the limestone caves, but Ron was nowhere to be found. Big surprise, thought Harry resentfully. Apart from their first night, he and Ron had hardly spent *any* time together at all. His Occlumency lessons continued with mixed success. He was doing fairly well at preventing Elizabeth seeing mundane memories, like what he had for breakfast, but emotional memories were more difficult. For today's lesson, held in a quiet nook of the garden, she produced a basketful of crystal balls.

She settled cross-legged on the grass and said, "We really need to work on dealing with your feelings." Harry did his best to treat this declaration with something other than abject horror. "Oh, come on; it'll be fun," she said. "I've charmed these balls with the *Animula* Charm. The charm lets you charge an inanimate object with emotion."

Harry warily eyed the crystal ball Elizabeth floated in front of him. Just how many emotions did she think he had?

Elizabeth smiled encouragingly and said, "You just need to hold your ball and ... well ... *feel*."

Harry dearly wanted to laugh. Where was Ron when you needed him?

"Just *feel* my ball ..." he checked with a poker face.

Elizabeth nodded innocently. "And you can keep charging the same ball for months. It only stops receiving when you issue the counter charm or a second person touches your ball. Then the emotions are fixed."

"Why does it have to be so big? I thought you only needed a small gem?"

"Oh no," Elizabeth said brightly, "you can use any kind of object, but crystals are the most common. Diamonds and emeralds are quite challenging to work with, though they last much longer and hold a lot more emotional charge."

Elizabeth started by having him invest simple physical sensations into the crystal balls: heat and cold and the like, which Harry mastered quite easily. Then it was onto emotions like joy and sadness, and then she had him combine physical and emotional sensations.

"So, if I'm feeling sad about being hungry or itchy or something, I can put that in, too?" checked Harry.

Elizabeth laughed. "Well, yes, I suppose so."

A whole world of opportunity opened to Harry. Grinning, he stood up and shook out his fingers. Placing them around a new ball, he closed his eyes and filled his mind with every sensation he could remember from being under tickling charms (he also threw in a few choice feelings about being strung up by Chastity Beads). He held onto the ball for about a minute and felt it growing steadily warmer in his hands. Opening his eyes, he saw it had taken on a pinkish-orange glow.

"May I?" asked Elizabeth, standing as well.

"Oh ..." Harry had actually intended the ball for Ron, but he couldn't think of an excuse, so he nodded and assembled a saintly expression on his face.

"You — little — bugger!" panted Elizabeth as Harry helped her back to her feet a minute later. "Right," she said, mustering what dignity she could after giggling and twitching helplessly on the grass for a full minute, "yes, well, I think you've got the hang of that well-enough for today."

"Sorry," said Harry, not sorry at all. In fact, he felt rather pleased with his godmother, who, to her credit, hadn't let go of the ball until it was completely spent.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" she asked sceptically, carefully floating the orange tickle-bomb safely back to the basket. "It usually takes much longer for people to learn to emote that strongly."

Funnily enough, Elizabeth decided Harry had charged enough Emotional Bombshells for one day, but she did urge him to work on them during term for practice in identifying and isolating his emotions. Calling a halt for the day, she slipped her hand though the crook of his arm, and the pair ambled through the garden under escort by six peacocks. Cho2 waddled behind. As they wandered along, a jumble of questions played on Harry's mind: questions he'd never been able to ask his aunt.

"Elizabeth, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Harry."

"What was Mum like?"

From inside a vine-covered arcade, Elizabeth slowed to a stop and stared into the distance, as if the answer might be found in the ripples of the sea.

"What would you like to know, Harry?"

Harry didn't even know where to begin. "I don't know. Anything, I guess. I just like hearing about her. I know she was a good person; I just don't know much else."

Elizabeth just nodded; Harry found himself holding his breath in anticipation.

Facing him, Elizabeth lifted his hand to her heart and said very gently, "Lily was a truly dreadful cook."

Harry burst out laughing. Smiling warmly, his godmother stole a kiss from his knuckles, then slipped her arm in his again.

"You laugh like her," she observed as they continued their walk, "like it's all or nothing. But seriously, your mother was an absolute menace in the kitchen. The things your father ate in the name of love. And he was such a fussy eater, too; everything had to be just so. He insisted on making your baby food himself. He so doted on you; they both did."

Strolling past Aphrodite's fountain, the pair wended their way to the beach where, under a cooling sun, they played an impromptu game of noughts and crosses in the wet sand with their toes. They stayed on the beach for hours, just talking about Lily.

After another delicious dinner, Harry was relaxing in the bungalow's lounge, reading *Captains Courageous* and enjoying going through the hand-written notes his father had made in the margins, when Ron stormed into the living room. Natalie raced in after him, looking confused and upset.

"Hey," Harry said lazily, "what's up?"

"Natalie reckons the Lupins are moving back to Canada," Ron said without preamble. "Did you know about this?"

Harry's insides tensed. He knew nothing of the sort.

"Well, they can't!" Ron declared forcefully. "You need Lupin here!"

Harry's throat burned. He just barely managed a slight shrug.

"It's fine," he said, though it felt like someone had ripped out his heart and was cutting it up to spear on skewers.

"Yeah," Natalie agreed with relief. "I mean, Harry'll be away at school all year, so what does it matter where they live? He can come home to Canada in the holidays."

"Harry needs them here!" shot Ron angrily.

Remus was leaving him. The burning in Harry's throat thickened horribly.

"What about my aunt?" Natalie fired back at Ron. "Is she supposed to just give up everything? Her family, her friends, her job? Uncle Remus isn't working and, as far as I know, he doesn't have much family left. And the rules against werewolves getting jobs aren't as bad in Canada. Can't you see it'll be much better for them if they stay in Montreal?"

"Lupin has to take care of Harry!" railed Ron. "He's his *guardian*!"

Natalie looked upset but also genuinely perplexed. "But that's what I'm saying! If he's serious about protecting Harry, then shouldn't he be getting him as far away from England as he can? He should be sending him to school in Canada, as well — keep him away from the war."

Ron shook his head angrily. "You don't get it! Harry *is* the war!"

Natalie and Ron kept arguing, but Harry stopped listening. It was over. It was all over. And he was alone again.

"Natalie's right," he said quietly, and the other two fell silent at the sound of his voice. "There's more for them in Canada. It'll be better for them. They deserve a fresh start. They —"

Harry broke off and lurched to his feet; he needed to get out, needed to fly. "I might turn in — night."

He retreated to his bedroom and locked the door, but instead of retiring, he grabbed his Firebolt and shot out the open balcony doors, soaring straight into the starry sky. At first, he just wanted to get away from Natalie and Ron, then the bungalow, then the island, and then he just kept going, he couldn't stop. If he stopped he'd have to think — and that wasn't going to be a good idea.

The air was thin and bitterly cold before he finally slowed down. He floated to a stop, shivering in an inky blackness, barely able to tell up from down. Blanketed all around him were millions of twinkling stars — and one waning moon. Remus promised he'd be there for him — no matter what — but that was before his wife came back. They'd be much happier in Canada, Harry kept telling himself. Remus might even get a job over there. They had family, friends, and there was no war in Canada. They'd be safe over there. Britain was a mess. He was just this huge complication for them. If he wasn't around, Remus wouldn't even think twice about moving countries to be with his wife.

Each thought plunged another skewer into Harry's heart. His breath fogged around him. He tried to swipe at his hot, wet nose but could barely pry his frozen fingers from his broomstick and was left to snuffle heavily in the blackness. It had been a good couple of months. Well, most of it.

"C-could've done without the b-bath," he bit through chattering teeth.

A bitter laugh escaped his shaking lips. What was he doing up here? He had the same problems whether he was up above or down below. And up here he stood a good chance of getting frostbite all over again; his bare feet were already blue with cold. He began his descent, knowing he'd be of age next summer. He could live alone at Headquarters, or the island, they were both safe enough. The Lupins liked the island ... they might visit him. Harry forced himself to a stop.

"Get a grip," he said sternly, recognising the self-pity, "you're not a child any more!"

You don't need a dad, he told himself resolutely as he resumed his descent. Maybe when he was younger, but the time for that had well passed. The prophecy said he'd be marked as the Dark Lord's equal, and there were all these new mind skills he was developing — especially astral travelling — they had to come in handy — for spying if nothing else.

"You can do this," he told himself with grim confidence. "You just have to figure out how."

He didn't know if he could actually defeat Voldemort, but he knew he was up to the challenge of making himself as prepared as he possibly could. If Remus was there to help him, then so much the better — Harry would take whatever help he could get — but if not, well, he was still at Hogwarts for the next two years; did it really matter where Remus lived? They could write letters. He could get his WizChat thing back from Ron. And anyway, there were worse fates than spending Christmas being fussed over by a hundred Hogwarts house-elves. A lot worse. Maybe it did hurt like hell right now, but he knew he'd manage okay on his own. He always had. He always would.

As he lost altitude, a new feeling fought through the dull ache in Harry's heart. Fear. Below him stretched a black sea unrelieved by any sign of land. No whitewash against rocks, no torch-lit paths, no pools gleaming with underwater flames. Harry hovered twenty feet above the Mediterranean Sea, black stretching in every direction. Never in his life had he been so physically alone, though he knew vaguely where he must be. If he flew north, he'd hit Sicily in a few hours, but whether he should then head east or west would be a toss-up. But at least he'd be over land. Shivering, Harry searched the stars and started doing some calculations.

His brain was so thick with cold he didn't notice her at first. But then he did, and his heart soared. His beautiful, wonderful, glorious snowy owl glided serenely towards him, her creamy wings caressing the inky dark. Hedwig landed on her master's shoulder and proceeded to hoot sternly at him for a full minute, giving him quite a piece of her mind. Harry leaned his cold face into her warm body and let her.

At breakfast next morning, Harry maintained a noble, if somewhat annoyed, silence, wondering all the while if the Lupins were ever going to bother telling him what was going on. And even when they did, Harry was determined not to make a scene, not fall to pieces as he had the previous month. Remus and Elizabeth seemed to realise something was wrong, but there was *no way* Harry was going to be the one who brought it up. He'd come to terms with them leaving, but he had his pride; he deserved a proper explanation!

Remus started conjuring excuses as to why he and Harry would be busy that day (for Natalie's benefit, so as to conceal a shopping trip to Diagon Alley for school supplies). Remus said he wanted to work with Harry on his homework and started waffling on about Shield Charms. Harry jerked to his feet, causing the table to shake.

"Come on then, Professor," he said gruffly, pulling his sleeve down over his sadly yellow and indignantly purple moodstone, "let's get it over with."

Back in London, Remus and Harry were almost done at the Apothecary when Remus swore beneath his breath. Harry looked at the fat Australian Witchetty Grubs crawling over his fingers.

"They're not that bad —" he started, but then he looked up; Draco Malfoy and his mother had just come sweeping into the shop.

The dark feelings were entirely mutual. The Malfoys pretended Remus and Harry didn't even exist and loudly demanded the Apothecary's attention. The little old man, covered head to toe in a green, dragon-hide smock, beret, and matching gloves, was carefully measuring out some Monkshood for Harry. The Apothecary's eyes flicked anxiously between his glowering customers. Feigning deafness appeared the most attractive course of action.

"Mother, aren't there *laws* against *beasts* buying magical ingredients?" Draco drawled nastily.

Narcissa Malfoy's lips twisted into an ugly little smile. Pus oozed through Harry's fingers as two grubs met an unfortunate fate. Remus put a restraining hand on Harry's arm, as if he knew Harry would like nothing better than to shove the rest of his Witchetty Grubs straight up Malfoy's snotty nose.

"Patience, my dear," Narcissa Malfoy tutted to her son, adding haughtily, "laws change. But the air certainly is *foul* in here today."

"Not as foul as the air in *Azkaban*!" Harry shot angrily, succeeding in getting the Malfoys' full and livid attention. "You should try it sometime! I'm sure dear old Dad would just love the company!"

"Harry!" Remus said sharply. "Enough!"

"All done," the Apothecary piped up, nervously patting a stack of tightly-wrapped packages.

Remus paid the man, grabbed Harry by the shoulder and half-dragged him from the shop. Out in the Alley, Harry glared mutinously at his guardian. Remus had just stood there, letting them treat him like dirt!

"Why d'you let them just walk all over —"

"I said enough," Remus cut in harshly, striding now down the Alley. "The laws are tough enough, I don't need you handing them any more ammunition. Don't you get it?" he snapped, spinning on Harry when he started to object. "Werewolf causes fight in Diagon Alley!" Next thing you know, I'll be banned from buying so much as a loaf of bread."

Harry clenched his fists in frustration and regretted it immediately; he was still holding three Witchetty Grubs.

"What did she mean, laws change?" he asked fitfully, shaking off the worst of the pus and wiping the rest off on his jeans.

Breathing heavily, Remus nodded towards a café on the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, and didn't speak again until they were sitting inside with two cups of strong coffee.

"There's talk of a beast census," he said, "and new legislation —"

Harry leant closer. "About werewolves?"

"No, actually. Not directly. Centaurs are the current target."

"Oh." Harry had mixed feelings about Centaurs. Firenze was okay, but the others were a prickly lot. "But Centaurs are protected, aren't they?"

"Laws change," Remus said shortly. "By the sound of the legislation someone *really* doesn't like them. There's even talk of a hunting season, though they haven't quite used those words."

Harry was revolted. He knew of one person who would stop at nothing to wipe out 'half-breeds'.

"It's Umbridge, isn't it?" he snapped bitterly, suddenly feeling a lot more sympathetic towards the Centaurs. "She couldn't hack it in the forest and she'll never stop until they're all exterminated!"

"Probably," Remus said darkly, "I'll wager Vampires'll be next — they've had a fairly good run to date, all things considered. Veela, too, I imagine."

"Madam Bones won't pass those sorts of laws, will she?" pressed Harry. Only yesterday, Madam Bones had officially replaced Cornelius Fudge as Minister for Magic.

"She has certain powers of veto," said Remus, "but if the proposals are contested and go before the Wizengamot, then who knows?"

"But Dumbledore won't stand for that," said Harry, "he's the Chief Warlock again, isn't he?"

"He is," agreed Remus, "but he, too, is subject to the voting system. It comes down to lobbying and how convincing the opposing parties are."

Harry stared morosely out the café window. His eyes narrowed on spotting Draco Malfoy hurrying down Knockturn Alley. Probably heading for Borgin and Burkes, Harry thought sourly, off to pawn some dark little family heirloom.

"There's not too much more they can do to werewolves," Remus continued cynically. "Elizabeth will try to find out more when she starts work."

Harry dragged his eyes back to his guardian; he'd almost forgotten.

"What — back in Canada?" he said tightly.

"Canada? No. Here, in Britain." Remus regarded Harry quizzically then frowned deeply. "You didn't think — Harry, Elizabeth is moving back home. She's here for good."

Harry could barely hear Remus over the pounding in his ears.

"You're not leaving?" he asked stupidly.

"No, whatever gave you that idea?"

"I—" Harry struggled to find his voice.

"So *that's* why you've been moping around all day!" Remus declared with evident relief.

"Oh. No — I mean, of course not — I never ..." Harry fell silent under Remus's penetrating gaze.

"I'm not leaving you, Harry," he said quietly. "I am *never* leaving you."

Harry fought to suppress what he suspected was a rather idiotic grin. Back in the alley, a more ebullient Harry kept an eye out for Hermione's seventeenth birthday present. He didn't see anything inspiring in Flourish and Blotts' bookshop, so he settled on getting her a piece of jewellery, figuring he could always load it up with emotion later. They were nearly ready to leave Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions when Remus yanked Harry into a changing cubicle.

"What?" Harry hissed urgently.

"Hush," ordered Remus.

"Death Eaters?" whispered Harry. He peeked through a slit in the drape, but all he could see was Madam Malkin serving an elegantly attired customer.

"Worse," Remus bit tersely, "my mother-in-law."

Remus and Harry stayed crouched in the cramped cubicle for ten long, sweaty minutes. Harry smelled horribly of Witchetty Grub pus, and Remus's elbow kept getting stuck in his ear.

"How did you ever get sorted into Gryffindor?" hissed Harry.

"No idea," muttered Remus.

Mrs Ramsay finally left and the Gryffindor boys tumbled breathlessly from the cubicle.

"Oh, there you are!" cried Madam Malkin. "I thought you'd left without your new robes."

"Just got a bit stuck," Remus muttered.

"Stuck," Harry confirmed flatly, shooting a foul look at his guardian. "I'll be at the jewellers'."

The jewellers was right next door to Madam Malkin's. On display were numerous signet rings, friendship rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets and such, but Harry wasn't sure what Hermione would like.

The sales-witch, a heavily made up woman with three chins and a beehive of blonde hair that towered precariously, tried to interest Harry in their 'pre-loved' line. Harry thought she meant 'used' until he picked up a ring and felt sickly sweet emotions washing over him. It seemed the jeweller saved people the trouble of coming up with feelings of their own.

"We have some lovely emotions on sale this month," the sales-witch assured him.

Harry was revolted. What would Hermione think? Receiving some lovey-dovey trinket?

"No?" prompted the witch, looking deeply disappointed in him when Harry found the will to resist. Undeterred, she started firing off questions he couldn't possibly be expected to answer. Did his young lady favour goblin workmanship? Antique or modern? Gold or silver? Her favourite colour?

"Erm ..." Harry strained to remember something — anything. Hermione's dress at the Yule Ball was blue. "She likes blue."

"And what is our young lady's birth date?"

At last, a question Harry could answer!

"September the nineteenth," he said confidently.

"But of course," declared the witch, "sapphires! Faith, truth, purity, and foresight!"

That sounded about right to Harry, though he idly wondered if they had a stone for nagging about homework. With a flourish of her wand, the sales-witch summoned a wide variety of sapphire jewellery and laid them across a plush velvet throw. Harry's eyes boggled at the prices.

"Do you have anything cheaper?" he asked. The sales-witch seemed suddenly rather hard of hearing.

He found a modest friendship ring with three small blue stones, but he lost interest when the sales-witch started asking about ring sizes. A pair of earrings next caught his eye, but he was foiled again when he was unable to remember whether Hermione had pierced ears. He finally settled on a silver necklace with a small blue sapphire set above a teardrop pearl. That seemed safe. She definitely had a neck.

As the tube train trundled towards home, Harry's fingertips grew numb from gripping his strung-up textbooks whilst his mind grappled even trickier topics. A few days earlier, he told Remus about a nightmare he had in which Katie Bell was killed because he couldn't move to save her. Remus managed to dig into his subconscious and deduce that Voldemort had frozen him with a Legilimens Charm when he first arrived in the Ministry: a revelation that Harry found immensely relieving; he'd been worried he would never even be able to move in the Dark Lord's presence. Now, there was another matter Harry fancied discussing but not in the company of Muggle commuters.

Back at Grimmauld Place, with new textbooks and supplies strewn across Harry's bed, Remus carefully marked them off against his school lists. Loitering against a bedpost, Harry asked him to check again. He kept hoping Remus would notice what else was on the bed, but he didn't — or if he did notice, he wasn't betraying the least bit of curiosity. In an effort to delay their return to Black Island, Harry fetched a pair of coffees and settled determinedly in his wing chair. When Remus persisted in failing to notice the object in question (which had miraculously found its way from the bed to the coffee table), Harry resorted to bringing up the topic himself.

"Thought I might do some more drawing," he said, nodding to the drawing pad on the table. When Remus merely nodded politely, Harry felt obliged to add, "I tried to draw Sirius, but I couldn't do it."

"Fingers still sore?" Remus guessed.

Harry flexed his fingers. "No, it's not that. This was before ... after he was killed."

Remus lowered his mug, his attention secured. "I see."

Harry somehow doubted that. "I was having all these dreams — nightmares and stuff," he confided. "I was hunting down Bellatrix Lestrange. It was so easy in my dreams. I'd turn into this powerful demon ..."

Remus's brow furrowed but he made no comment; he didn't need to; Harry could almost see him connecting the dots with his visions of Megaera. Harry jiggled his knees, nervous now about revealing how his dreams in Privet Drive had always ended.

"Go on," Remus said, lifting his mug encouragingly.

Harry gathered his nerve. "See, in my dreams I'd catch her, no problem. And she'd be there all helpless and frightened at my feet, and I'd be all ready to send her straight to hell, but then I'd see her face, and it wasn't her at all."

"Who was it?" asked Remus.

"Mum," Harry said forlornly. Remus winced in sympathy. "There's more," Harry said, needing to get it all out on the table. "When I was at Privet Drive, I tried to draw Sirius; I was trying to remember good things, you know? But it got all screwed up in my head. Then you came and brought me here and everything just got worse — oh, sorry, no, that didn't come out right ..."

Remus waved away Harry's apology; they both knew there wasn't much that went right in their first week together at number twelve.

"Anyway, this is what happened whenever I tried to draw Sirius," Harry finished.

Remus accepted the drawing pad and turned through page after page of demonic versions of Harry's face. Harry sat on the edge of his seat, waiting, hoping Remus would have the answers he needed.

"I see," Remus said again, and this time Harry knew he did see.

Closing the pad, Remus decided he could use a second cup of coffee. Harry raced downstairs and brought back the whole pot. Over a pair of steaming mugs, they discussed at length the nightmares Harry had after Sirius's death, Harry speaking of his rage and fears with a kind of candour he wished he'd been able to have with Sirius himself, but even so there was one thing he couldn't bring himself to reveal.

Examining the demon portraits again, Remus said, "We've talked about how helpless you felt under Voldemort's wand, but there's something else, isn't there. In your dreams, you're in complete control; she's at your mercy, but something's still holding you back. Why else would you give her a face you love so dearly."

Harry couldn't meet the man's eyes. Obviously, he didn't want to kill his mother, but Remus knew that.

"Do you want to tell me what happened when you chased after Lestrange?" Remus asked quietly.

Harry gulped too much coffee and burned his throat; he almost welcomed the pain.

"I found her. I cursed her — I tried to —" Harry broke off; he couldn't say it.

"You tried to kill her?" Remus suggested.

Harry looked up, expecting the worst, but found no contempt, no revulsion, in the man's world-weary eyes.

"Not kill," Harry said, rubbing his knuckles. "Don't get me wrong; I wanted to. I would've; it's just — she was just gloating so much. I went nuts. I — I got her with the Cruciatus Curse."

Remus's face remained impassive; he merely nodded for Harry to go on.

Harry said bitterly, "I hated her so much. I wanted her to feel what I felt. I gave her everything I had, but all I did was knock her off her feet. She said I'd need more than 'righteous fury' to keep her down for long, said I needed to really want to cause pain, to enjoy it."

"She's right about that," Remus said frankly. "I think I can guess now why your subconscious conjured Megaera. She's the very personification of righteous fury, exacting vengeance on her victims."

As much as Harry had come to loathe his subconscious, he shook his head. "No, that was later; I didn't see Megaera until Potterfest; I went to bed angry — insane — actually."

"About what?" Remus asked with concern. Harry was sorely tempted to lie, to say something about Voldemort setting him off, but he didn't.

"Cho and George dancing together."

To Harry's eternal gratitude, Remus did not laugh.

"Well, Megaera is known as the Jealous Fury," he noted fairly. "Not the happiest of creatures to awaken in a lad."

Harry frowned in thought. What Remus said made sense, but Megaera felt so real.

"Hey," Remus said encouragingly, reaching a hand to rub his shoulder, "the fact that you can't cast a decent Crucio is hardly a bad thing."

Reminded of the real issue, Harry groaned bitterly into his hands. "I'm utterly useless! How am I ever going to kill anyone if I can't even —"

"Hang on just a minute," Remus said, cutting him off. "Unforgivables are called that for a reason, and aren't to be cast lightly, but they're just spells and can be learned like any other. The Cruciatus Curse aside, both the Imperius and the Killing Curse have defensive uses. Hit Wizards, Aurors, even Healers, are trained to use them in extreme circumstances."

Harry moistened his lips and braved a question he'd wanted to ask for a long time, "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Yes," Remus said soberly. "But you were right to stop us killing Peter in the Shack. It would have been murder. It's different in battle, in the defence of innocents. Sometimes you have no choice." Drawing closer, his hand curled around Harry's neck. "You're not alone, Harry. Believe me; we're going to get you through this."

And Harry believed him.

The next few days saw the Black Island houseguests departing one by one. Natalie was philosophical about her aunt moving to England, "They've got *excellent* shoe shopping." Ron left shortly after Natalie, and then Harry was packing up his own belongings. He had to banish Lovey and Dovey from helping him; their tears were getting everything wet. Mindful of what happened with Sirius, Harry insisted on farewelling the Lupins privately before leaving for the train, but it wasn't easy. Words couldn't come close to describing how much it meant to him to have people of his own outside Hogwarts.

"You can write ..." he mumbled after receiving a back-thumping bear hug from Remus, "if you like ..."

"Count on it," Remus said, messing the hair Elizabeth just tried to smooth. Elizabeth countered that move by giving Harry another hug and kiss.

Even as the warm feelings filled him up, Harry felt frustration, too, frustration that two such good people would never be seeing their *own* kids off to Hogwarts. They would have made such great parents. On the way to Kings Cross, Harry continued turning their prophecy inside and out. He decided he could take the second half as meaning that Remus had come to think of him as a son, but he couldn't see a way around the first part — with Remus biting his wife — the 'hooded monk poisoning his beloved' bit. He thought he was onto something when he recalled the story of the Lupins' first date — when they 'nearly poisoned each other'. But then he realised that happened years before the prophecy came out, and, in any case, it was Sirius who had spiked the wine — and Elizabeth wasn't Sirius's beloved (nor did Harry imagine Sirius fancied Remus).

Soon, Harry was pushing his trolley through the barrier for platform nine and three-quarters. The Hogwarts Express stood as proud as ever, ready to consume a new student body and belching grey steam to add to the air of confusion of people and cats and noise that always signalled the start of another school year.

"No, I can do it," Harry said quickly when Remus tried to take care of his trunk. Harry wanted to put as much distance between himself and the Lupins as possible.

"Harry!" Hermione came rushing towards him. She greeted Remus and Elizabeth warmly, but Harry impatiently pulled her away.

"Come on; let's get going."

"Oh, okay," said Hermione. "Bye! Have you seen Ron?"

"Not yet," said Harry. He helped Hermione with Crookshanks and her trunk before manhandling his own menagerie aboard.

"Oh, I loved your letter!" she declared brightly as they moved down the corridor, then her expression darkened on adding, "but do you know I had the worst trouble filling my Potions kit. You'd think they'd stock up properly this time of year!"

"Right," Harry muttered; he was busy peering into compartments, looking for a sign of Susan Bones — just to hand over Frank, of course. But if there just happened to be a spare seat ...

"I mean to say," Hermione continued indignantly, "it's not as if they don't know there's going to be a great influx of students. Harry? Are you listening to me?"

"Huh? Fluxweed, yeah," he said as they tried to manoeuvre past a wedge of giggling fourth-year girls.

"Fluxweed?" said Hermione. "No, they had plenty of that, but did you have any trouble getting Borage or Monkshood?"

"What? No, I got everything. Hang on," Harry's heart started beating madly, "did you say *Monkshood*?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "You know, Aconite — Wolfsbane, it goes by a few names. Then there's the Latin roots, of course —" Hermione broke off at the look on Harry's face. "What?"

"Hermione, I could kiss you!"

The girls blocking their path giggled furiously. Hermione pinked.

"Oh, well, if you —" she started then yelped in pain when Harry dropped his trunk on her foot and bolted back down the corridor with Hedwig's

cage under one arm and Frank's basket under the other.

"Sorry — sorry!" he fired at random, tripping over people as he struggled to reach an exit. Blocked again, he shoved his way into a compartment. "Sorry — scuse me — sorry!"

He dumped Hedwig, squawking in protest, to the left, tossed Frank's basket to the right and lunged for the windows. A girl screamed (presumably the one who got Frank).

"See, here," said one boy, "you can't just barge in —"

"Sorry — sorry!" panted Harry. "Just be a tick — sorry!"

"There's no need to be pointing that thing at me, young lady," Frank hissed. The girl screamed a lot louder.

"Frank, please," Harry hissed in Parseltongue, "back in your basket. Be good, eh? I'll get you something special for dinner."

"I'll be good if *she* will," Frank grumbled, retreating. "A nice piece of rump, I think, and don't be stingy with the gravy."

"Did you see that?" breathed a girl in awe. "It just curled up straight away!"

"It?" Frank said indignantly.

Harry was already fumbling with the window. He stuck his head out and screamed, "Moony!" but the noise of the train and children squealing on the platform drowned him out. He could see the Lupins standing by the wall where he'd left them. They were chatting with Molly and Arthur Weasley. Harry grabbed his wand and wriggled further out. All thought of keeping a low profile flew out the window — and so almost did his body before helping hands inside the compartment steadied him. "Thanks," he muttered over his shoulder. He didn't care to ponder how undignified he must look with his backside sticking out. This thought did, however, help him choose his target. Aiming his wand very carefully, Harry fired an arrow that landed right in —

Remus yelped in a rather undignified way and plucked the arrow from his butt. He squinted darkly through the crowd for the archer before spotting Harry waving madly from a window two carriages down. Rubbing his backside in annoyance, Remus edged through the madding crowd of families, cats, and trolleys, as students raced to board the train.

Harry's mind reeled. *It had to be it! It had to be what they meant! Monkshood! The hooded monk!* Elizabeth had poisoned herself when she was developing the Wolfsbane Potion! The herb — that's what the *flower* looked like — a monk's cowl!

"Forget something, Apollo?" Remus asked dryly, twirling Harry's arrow in his fingers.

Dangling from the window, Harry grabbed Remus by the shoulders and dragged him close to whisper excitedly in his ear, "You're not the monk! She brings *me* death! *I'm* the one!"

"What are you babbling about?" said Remus. "Did someone hex you?"

"It's over!" hissed Harry. "Merlin, you suck at Potions! Don't you see?!"

Remus listened in growing amazement as Harry feverishly explained: about Elizabeth nearly dying from testing Monkshood on herself; about him, Harry, being brought to the brink of death by Elizabeth's arrival; about them longing for children; about Remus thinking Harry was like a —

Harry stopped, suddenly embarrassed, but Remus had found his voice and rasped, "Like a son to me." He clutched at Harry's arms as the truth sank in. "It's over ..." he said dazedly.

The Hogwarts Express tooted impressively in agreement and Remus disappeared momentarily inside a cloud of steam. Harry chortled gleefully and shook Remus's shoulders, breaking the man from his steamy stupor.

"Harry, I ..." started Remus.

"GO!" yelled Harry.

Remus reeled backwards, tripping over stray cats and children. He stumbled drunkenly towards his wife and swept her up in his arms, laughing and spinning her around and around. Elizabeth's hat flew off and her skirt flared. A bemused Molly and Arthur Weasley looked on indulgently as Elizabeth blushed furiously and tried to make Remus put her down right this minute! He silenced her protests with a kiss — and what a kiss!

Cries of, "Is that Professor Lupin?" travelled like wildfire up and down the train, and howling catcalls and wolf whistles erupted as heads popped out of windows and eyes popped out of heads, Harry cheering loudest of them all.

He spotted Ron and Hermione further down, waving and cheering. Lavender and Parvati were giggling furiously, and Terry Boot and other familiar DA faces were all beaming at each other and at the Lupins as the train lurched into motion. Children ran along the platform, waving madly to their brothers and sisters as they pulled away from the station. The Lupins were oblivious to it all and soon were no more than tiny dots to Harry. But they were his tiny dots. And he was The One: The One that Voldemort chose to become his equal; The One with a secret power the Dark Lord knew not; The One who could defeat him. And just right now, right this minute, The One felt as if he could conjure a Patronus to vanquish a thousand Dementors!

Harry suddenly dodged a signal light.

... And it didn't hurt that The One knew how to duck.

– The End –