

“Good. Being able to clear your mind and compartmentalise is an essential skill when duelling; a true battle requires you to be paying attention to a dozen things at once. Emotions cannot get in the way — a split second of distraction is all it takes to kill you.”

“Have you ever duelled against Death Eaters, sir?” Harry asked curiously. Snape’s lips thinned.

“We were often encouraged to duel each other to sharpen our skills. The Dark Lord didn’t like us holding back on each other; he said if we were weak enough to die, we didn’t deserve to serve him. I learned not to be weak.”

Harry sincerely doubted Snape had ever been *weak*, but he held his tongue.

They bumped into Remus in the kitchen when they went to put their glasses away, and the werewolf sniffed the air, then made an exaggerated face of disgust. “You two smell like you’ve been busy. Good session?”

“Potter isn’t as terrible as I’d feared,” Snape replied, the closest thing he’d give to a compliment. Remus grinned.

“Glad to hear it. Go wash up for dinner, both of you; I’ll lose my appetite if I have to smell that while I eat. Worse than James and Sirius after quidditch.”

Harry laughed, obediently heading out of the kitchen to take a shower. Snape didn’t follow, and he refused to think too hard about why.

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Training continued the next day, though it finished early due to another Order meeting. Snape set Harry the task of reading up on the pros and cons of different types of shields, so he happily whiled away the hour in the library, with Ceri occasionally popping in to check on him while she made dinner. She took the responsibility of looking after Harry while he was home alone very seriously.

Remus and Snape returned just in time for dinner, and Remus took something out of his pocket and set it on the table in front of Harry. It was a smooth grey stone, about the size of a chicken’s egg. “Uh... thanks?”

“It’s from the twins,” Remus said, as if that explained *anything*. “They said it should solve your owl problem, at least. It’s supposed to take on your magical signature strongly enough that it’ll fool owls into thinking your delivery address is wherever you set it. They’ve been working on it for a while, apparently; ever since Ginny got all that hate mail from that Skeeter article. You can charge it up, then we’ll have Ceri pop it over to the Dursleys, and any owls sent to you will go there, so your watchers won’t wonder why you aren’t getting any post.”

“But what about all the people I want to owl me without Dumbledore knowing about it?” Harry asked, thinking of Draco and all the heirs. Not only would it be terribly inconvenient to have all those owls going to the Dursleys, it would raise far too many questions.