

Lupin smiled sadly, the light through the window highlighting the grey in his hair. “Thank you, Harry. It’s good to be back on my feet.”

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Deep down, Harry wished Ron and Hermione had gone home for Christmas. He felt awful for thinking it — they were his best friends, and he’d barely even seen them so far this term! — But so much had changed, and he was keeping so many things from them; the gap was getting harder and harder to bridge. If they were going home, he could just spend the whole break reading his books and practicing spells without any awkward questions. He was getting pretty good at that privacy charm, now.

Neville was going home, though, and he promised to talk to his gran about finding someone to test Harry’s Occlumency progress. Harry thought he was doing an alright job, but Neville was no Legilimens, and they couldn’t risk checking by letting Dumbledore root around in his brain.

He was a little more morose than he let on when they went to Hogsmeade the last weekend before Christmas break. Not because he wanted to go overly much; he just felt so *cooped up* in the castle. It was ridiculous — the last two years, he hadn’t even known about the option of going off the grounds. Now, he felt like he couldn’t survive without it.

Of course, it didn’t help that any time he so much as tried to leave the castle, someone was herding him right back inside. Harry couldn’t even go to quidditch practice unsupervised. He felt like he couldn’t breathe, he was so sick of being monitored. Part of him wanted Sirius Black to just attack him and get it over with.

Deciding to enjoy his time alone and work on some spells, Harry said goodbye to Ron and Hermione in the entrance hall and started the journey back up to Gryffindor Tower.

“Psst! Harry!” A freckled arm reached out, yanking him into a hidden space behind a tapestry. He stared at the twins, eyebrows raised.

“What’s the matter? Need an alibi for something?” he asked, eyeing them over as if he could tell what sort of prank they were about to pull.

“Nah, but thanks for the offer,” Fred said with a grin. “We just wanted to give you a bit of an early Christmas present.”

“Couldn’t stand to see you moping around by yourself!” George agreed. He thrust out a hand, showing Harry... a blank bit of old parchment.

“I don’t get it,” Harry said flatly. Both twins beamed.

“This, dear Harrikins, is the secret to our success,” they said in unison, clearly expecting him to be dazzled.

It still looked like a blank bit of old parchment.