

“Believe me, Miss Turpin, I can and I will. Be thankful there is no competent Ministry to speak of — Miss Dunbar is the only one of you under the age of seventeen. In an ordinary world, you’d be facing Azkaban for this.”

Turpin turned a little green.

“Professor, please! I— I didn’t mean to! They talked me into it, threatened my family!” Dunbar tried her best, but McGonagall was stone-faced.

“Then you should have come to me, Miss Dunbar, instead of deciding to be party to the kidnapping of your housemate,” she snapped. “I do not have the luxury of giving you the benefit of the doubt — not with the safety of our other students at stake.”

Harry was amazed by the woman’s composure as she ignored all of their protests, snapping each wand one by one without a hint of hesitation. He could do nothing but watch, waiting for the house elves to bring their trunks — and then waiting for Professor Flitwick to come and escort them to the gates. Lisa Turpin took one look at her housemaster’s disappointed face and flinched as if hit.

One by one they shuffled out of the office, until finally Harry was left alone with the headmistress. She shut the door with a wave of her hand, and stood with a steel-straight spine, staring at the worn wood. Harry didn’t dare move, watching her carefully. Did she even remember he was there?

“Did I just make a mistake, Potter?” she asked suddenly. When she looked at him, she looked older than he had ever seen her look, even when she had returned from St Mungo’s after taking four Stunners to the chest. The haunted gaze of the headmistress made Harry shudder.

“I— I don’t think it’s my place to say, Professor.”

McGonagall’s lips pursed, and then her whole body slumped, the fight leaving her in one sharp motion. She rounded her desk, sinking wearily into her chair, and the tartan biscuit tin floated over off the shelf. “Much as I hate to stereotype, the Slytherins... they were not a surprise. Miss Turpin and Miss Dunbar, however...”

“He gets in everywhere,” Harry pointed out sadly, sitting in the chair opposite when the biscuit tin was offered, grabbing a chocolate-coated shortbread. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think he really threatened Dunbar’s family. Her dad has been in hiding since November, and I know she knew he was safe.”

McGonagall quirked an eyebrow. “I’m not even going to ask how you know that.” Harry’s lips twitched. “I did assume as much; Miss Roper has come to me a few times this year out of concern for her friend, but there was little I could do — I’ll admit, I thought it was just stress.” She sighed, and Harry tried not to outwardly react when she summoned a bottle of whisky from a hidden corner of her shelf, pouring a generous finger. “It feels like sending them away from the school is doing them a disservice,” she said, shaking her head. “I know exactly where they’re going to go. Snapping their wands won’t keep them out of things for long.”