

## Chapter 2

### The Trial

One by one, Harry and the others stepped into the Grimmauld kitchen fireplace, traveling through the Floo Network and, moments later, arriving inside the center of the Atrium on the eighth level of the Ministry of Magic. Harry was the last to emerge from within the soot-lined confines of the fireplace, dusting off his robes and fussing with his unkempt hair, watching as numerous other witches and wizards popped out of the fireplaces adjacent to the one from whence he and his friends had just emerged.

"Alright, you lot, we're to head this way," said Tonks, waving Harry, Ron, and Hermione in her direction.

"I'll see all you at the trial. I have some things I need to tend to beforehand," said Remus, waving them off and strolling in the opposite direction.

"See you, Remus," replied the group in unison.

"I think it's fantastic that Scrimgeour elected to make *The Order of the Phoenix* a department and appointed Remus head of it," said Harry. "Remus deserves it."

Tonks smiled and replied jokingly, "Yes, but unfortunately his office is right next to mine. I see enough of him since I moved into Grimmauld. Now I have to stare at his hairy mug all day long at work, too."

Harry and Ron sniggered. Hermione kept unusually silent.

"What's with you, Hermione?" inquired Tonks, noting the blatant air of discontent in Hermione's manner.

"Aw, she's all sour because—" started Ron, instantly silencing the moment he caught wind of the harsh caveat glare Hermione purposefully bestowed upon him.

Tonks nodded in understanding and said empathetically, "You know, Hermione, when I graduated from Hogwarts, I too aspired to be a teacher."

Hermione's attentions were instantly swayed to and fixed with a purpose on Tonks.

"Y-you did? Really?" inquired Hermione.

"Yup. Only much like what happened to you, I was considered too young to acquire the post and Dumbledore denied my application. Still, I needed a job. Sure enough, one

afternoon, when I was thumbing through the pages of the Daily Prophet, I happened upon an article advertising the Ministry's need for Aurors. So, I signed up. It wasn't an easy task, mind you. As you well know, I failed those ruddy Auror exams nearly half a dozen times before I finally got it right. As it turns out, after a few years of serving as an Auror, I realized I didn't want to do anything else, ever. This job is all about helping and protecting fellow wizards from all walks of life. I can't imagine a more important or fulfilling task. Besides, I had my shot at teaching last year when the Ministry planted me in the DADA post for an added security measure. Much as I loved teaching my favorite subject, I must admit, I couldn't picture myself being cramped in a dark, stuffy little room flapping my gums away to a class full of lads and lasses who'd rather charm the split ends out of their hair than listen to a single thing I had to say. No, I tell you; Twirling my wand, repeating the same bloody lesson plans day after day and year after year is not my want. I'm right where I need to be and I couldn't be happier. Who knows, Granger, maybe you'll end up feeling the same way, too. If not, when the time is right, you can always turn to teaching and rest peacefully in knowing that you spent a few years of your life working to make the wizarding world a better place, a *safer* place."

Hermione's bitter disposition rapidly deteriorated with the close of Tonks' decree.

"Keeping people safe is *definitely* a highly commendable task," agreed Hermione in a small surrendering voice. "Maybe you're right. Perhaps I ought to give this a go. After all, it can only further enhance the knowledge I've already acquired through my studies at Hogwarts."

"Indeed, and it would make an excellent addition to your resume, particularly if you decide to pursue that DADA post again in the future," said Tonks with a soft reassuring smile.

Harry beamed and looked to Ron, who appeared equally as contented.

"Here we are you lot," said Tonks waving them into the lift, "we're to head to level nine, and then we'll need to take the stairs to get to the dungeons on the tenth level where the courtroom is situated."

In Harry's mind, the journey on the lift appeared to end before it even began; it seemed as though the instant the doors closed, they rattled open again, and he had spilled into the bare corridor lined up before Tonks, Ron, and Hermione. Harry shuddered as his eyes met the plain black door at the far end of the space labeled *The Department of Mysteries*.

*That's where Sirius died, he thought. Behind the veil. That's where Bellatrix Lestrange finished him off and where the Death Eaters attacked my friends and me in their attempt to steal the prophecy for Voldemort.*

A blistering anger roared up inside of Harry, feeling much to him like a severe case of indigestion. His only means of calming it was the knowledge that in just a short while,

he would see Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters officially condemned to life in Azkaban prison.

*I want to look all of them in the eye when they're judged, all of them, including Wormtail, he thought. By chance, should any one of them be sentenced to the terrible fate of Dementor's Kiss, I want to make certain I'm there to see it!*

"Harry," said Tonks, gently nudging his upper arm.

The sound of Tonks' voice jolted Harry back to reality, and he found himself unintentionally standing before the front of the door leading into the *Department of Mysteries*, his hand clapped firmly around the doorknob as though he was about to enter the space.

"Another time, Harry. You'll get a chance to see that space again during your training here. Now, come," said Tonks, cupping his shoulder with her hand and edging him in the direction of the staircase off to their left.

Harry looked back to the door, watching as it grew smaller and smaller as he was led away from it. He could feel the weight of Ron and Hermione's intent stares resting heavily on him. He didn't dare turn to meet them for fear the growing sensation of overwhelming sadness would claim the whole of him. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the entire morning in his newly appointed prominent position of a mighty Auror curled up in a corner somewhere, a sniveling wreck. Rather, he trained his focus ahead, peering into the darkness of the stone stairwell, trailing blindly down the staircase among Tonks' and his friends' escort, the light scuffing sound of their collective footsteps echoing soundly along the way.

The emotional turmoil that had abruptly found him was rather an unwelcome sentiment. Though he drew peace from the knowledge that Voldemort was gone and all of the Death Eaters would soon be formally punished for their delinquent misdeeds, something was missing from completing this moment. It was something that kept this happy ending, this so called "portrait of contentment" from feeling complete – his family; the family both he and Hannah had been so unfortunate to lose at the hands of Voldemort and his wretched followers. Somehow, the prospect of the Death Eaters' punishment of living out the rest of their lives in Azkaban Prison seemed more like a slap on the wrist than an adequate scolding.

"Harry," said Hermione quietly, tugging gently on the arm of his robes to call his attention to the fact that he was straggling off in the opposite direction of their intended destination. "This way."

Harry blinked heavily and shook his head out.

"Yeah-yeah, of course," he said, mildly disoriented.

How could he have forgotten, really? He had traveled this same dreadful path three years ago when he was summoned by the Ministry to defend his underage use of the Patronus Charm at age fifteen. It was whilst he was on summer holiday that he had cast the spell to ward off the Dementors attacking him and Dudley in the alleyway of Little Whinging.

Harry's stomach curdled when he recalled how truly unjust that whole trial really was. It had long been the understanding that the implementation of defensive magic was clearly permitted for use by underage wizards in the event of an emergency, such as the crisis he had faced. Yet, he had been severely penalized for it and nearly expelled from Hogwarts and the wizarding world as a result. All this, he would later discover, was Cornelius Fudge's fowl attempt at silencing his insistence that Voldemort had risen again. Apparently, Fudge had feared that such dreaded information being leaked to the public would cause mass panic, costing him his post as Minister of Magic. Luckily for Harry, Dumbledore came to his rescue and managed to sway the members of the Wizengamot to wave him off with a mere word of final warning.

And now, today, Harry would be witnessing yet more political hodge-podge at the hands of the wizarding world's twisted legal system. Even with Fudge having been replaced by Rufus Scrimgeour, not much seemed to have changed judicially, in Harry's opinion. After all, Draco Malfoy, a well-known Death Eater and constant source of malevolence, would be deemed a free man today, freed on the preposterous technicality that there existed a "dignified" word of proof of innocence delivered by the likes of one Severus Snape.

*How could anyone actually take into consideration Draco's employment of the most overused defense in wizarding history of claiming to have been manipulated into serving Voldemort by virtue of the Imperius Curse? Harry wondered. That excuse has been brazenly misused by so many criminals over the years. It's a complete joke!*

Unintentionally, Harry scoffed aloud and swung his fist angrily in protest in the space before him. Hermione flinched as the curve of his punch nearly clocked her in her temple.

"Sorry," he said, instantly acknowledging the near miss.

Hermione tugged empathetically on the sleeve of his robes and lent him a somber smile of reassurance. She wholeheartedly understood the reasoning behind his unruly gesture. In return, Harry nodded to her in appreciation, then shuffled silently along beside her as they filed into the tenth floor corridor.

The space was fully fashioned of rough dark stone walls upon which there paraded endless rows of torches stuffed into rustic metal brackets. The passageway stood wide, freckled with numerous tall oak doors garnished with heavy iron hardware. When they came upon the outskirts of courtroom number ten, Harry's heart dropped into his knees. There stood the man he had long despised since he was eleven; the man whom he had taken Hannah from; the same man who was about to set her attacker free. Harry

couldn't help but grimace horribly. He wanted to hit that filthy fiend, that dreadful excuse of a wizard he had come to know as none other than Severus Snape.

Snape appeared to take great pleasure in finding himself the bringer of Harry's torment. He stepped forward to confront Harry, characteristically cold and confident in his demeanor, sporting his usual crooked, sinister grin.

"Well, well, if it isn't the *infamous* Harry Potter and his permanently affixed sidekicks, Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley."

Harry snarled beneath his bated breath.

*I'm not going to let him get to me. I'm not.* He thought to himself repeatedly.

Snape's grin grew as he assumed the full knowledge of Harry's discontent.

"Such an extraordinary turn of events for you and your friends, Potter. You lot are Aurors, now, as I understand it," he said snidely.

"Yeah, so?" snapped Harry in reply.

"Hm, some rather interesting choices Minister Scrimgeour has been making these days. I'd rather thought he'd be a bit more discerning in filling the likes of such formidable posts. You acquiring this position, Mr. Potter, I could understand, having once been declared as the *chosen one* and all. It certainly makes for good publicity. Make's the Ministry appear *righteous* in the public eye. But, Granger and Weasley? Well, they certainly must be enjoying the free ride."

Harry's teeth clenched together and he hissed out boldly, "They *earned* their posts!"

Snape snorted and answered simply, "Really, do you think so?"

*"I know so!"*

"Hm...that's most certainly *not* how I see it. Nor is it how the rest of the wizarding community views it; I assure you."

Harry balled his fists and stiffened his arms as he stepped forward and proclaimed defiantly, "I'll tell you what I see *SNAPE*; I see someone who's unemployed and jealous that he's got no place to go. Will you be going back to that *dump* you call a house after the trial is over? Or has that wreck finally been condemned by the Ministry's Waste Management Department?"

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously at Harry. Yet, almost instantly, a bold show of victory pursued as he proclaimed soft and steadily, "As a matter of fact, Mr. Potter, it just so happens that I am set to return to Hogwarts to re-claim my teaching post as Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor."

Almost instantaneously, Harry's well of witty repartee had been siphoned completely dry. Had this exchange of words between him and Snape been a mud-slinging event, Harry would have been left covered in filth.

Harry's face, now flooded with an ocean's worth of disconcert, twitched emotively as he croaked out, "Y-you're to return to your post at Hogwarts?"

Snape smiled supremely. His conquering stare lingered gleefully over every portion of Harry's visibly troubled-ridden form as Snape replied sinisterly, "Yes, Potter. It was a last minute decision compelled by my nagging urge to...*teach* again."

Harry gulped, feeling a terrible sense of unease encroach him as he thought of Hannah and how she was about to discover she had suddenly become an unanticipated and unfortunate colleague of Snape. This was the very thing Harry feared the most, as he knew for certain Snape had an ulterior motive for his abrupt and inexplicable desire to return to Hogwarts.

Snape grinned horribly, then turning to Hermione, he sneered, "Such a pity that your application was denied, Miss Granger; truly it is. It's my understanding that had I not approached McGonagall about reacquiring my post, she might have actually considered hiring you, even at such a young age, as they were having quite a time procuring adequate candidates. Of course, the moment I reapplied, the Headmistress was overjoyed, knowing she wouldn't have to settle for...*second* best." He let out an exaggerated and unsympathetic *tsk*, which made Hermione's face sour terribly, as though she'd just bitten into the skin of a rancid lemon.

"That will be quite enough, Severus," came a calm, collected voice from behind him.

Snape turned to meet this voice and replied silkily, "Ah...Lupin: Head of the newly established *Order of the Pheonix* office. No doubt, you're flooded with all sorts of *significant* tasks these days. You're presently a department of *one*. Am I not correct? Well, seeing as how the rest of the Order is currently occupied with tending to the joy of living a contented and peaceful life now that Voldemort is finished, I see no reason for Scrimgeour to add to your staff."

Lupin's upper lip twitched and his face flushed a deep, profound pink.

Harry pushed angrily forward and snarled out, "For your information, *Snivelus*, Scrimgeour and the entire executive branch of the Ministry unanimously agreed to award Lupin that post as a result of his single-handedly eliminating Lucius Malfoy, and for his courage and dealings in helping me destroy Voldemort!"

"Harry –" started Remus, resting his hand with gentle reassurance on Harry's shoulder. This was very clearly Remus' diplomatic attempt at capping Snape's painfully obvious and rather brutal attempt at rattling the lot of them.

Snape's eyes narrowed at Harry in aversion. Barring his teeth, he growled out low and unsteady, "Mr. Potter, surely you must realize that were it not for the guidance and protection of Hannah Black and myself, none of you would have made it past the mere *prospect* of seeing to Voldemort's demise. If you recall, Lupin, the wizarding world's 'unsung hero' in your estimation, spent most of last year trying to get your sweet Hannah *sacked* from her post as your sentinel and from the Order. Yes, as I see it, Lupin's award of this post is merely fluff, a consolation prize for him managing to keep his mouth *shut* when he accidentally stumbled across the top-secret information that Hannah had been hired as a double spy by the Ministry. Not surprisingly, Lupin has so willingly taken full advantage of Scrimgeour's career proposition. Although, I can fully understand why. There's not exactly an endless parade of respectable employers lining the streets in hopes of hiring a *werewolf*, particularly one that has *killed* in the past."

Remus looked both infuriated and humiliated.

Tonks shoved forward and declared precariously, "Speaking of taking advantage of propositions, Severus, it appears as though you've been making full use of *your* newly acquired tile of 'acclaimed hero' as well. It's my understanding that your request for the reinstatement of your post as DADA teacher at Hogwarts occurred immediately upon your discovery that Hannah Black had been appointed there as Potions Mistress. *Exactly* what *reason* did you give McGonagall for wanting back into the school anyway? Teaching was never your *thing*, or so I've heard that you used to declare, and from a rather reliable source who once considered herself to be very close to you."

Snape eyed Tonks coldly.

Upon noting Harry's smug and satisfactory grin to Tonks' snappy retort, Snape smiled tauntingly at Harry and said, "Don't worry, Potter. I'll be certain to see to it that Hannah doesn't get too *lonely* during the school week whilst you and she are apart. After all, she and I will likely be seeing quite a bit of one other, you know, our having been appointed as *co-heads* of the Slytherin House. Surely, we'll need to spend many a late night and *countless cozy dinners for two* hashing over house rules and such."

Harry's face nearly melted beneath the heat of the distress this additionally shocking revelation had brought him.

"You're lying. Hogwarts has never allowed for co-heads of house," he retorted challengingly.

Snape's celebratory expression made Harry cringe.

"Yes, well, *extraordinary* circumstances call for *extraordinary* measures, don't they, Mr. Potter? I assure you; Ms. Black and I will be sharing the post and working rather *closely* together. I do hope that doesn't pose too much a quandry for you," said Snape cuttingly.

A rampant urge to knock Severus Snape silly was suddenly roaring up inside of Harry. Very likely, he would have been compelled to act on it were it not for the abrupt arrival

of the Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, who interrupted their conversation by calling out jovially, "Severus Snape! Excellent to see you again, my friend, *excellent!*" Scrimgeour reached out to shake Snape's hand.

"Minister Scrimgeour, it's always a pleasure to make your acquaintance as well," Snape replied, clearly indulging in the biting rage that was now penetrating every measured centimeter of Harry's tormented flesh.

"I hear you'll be reclaiming your post as DADA teacher at Hogwarts. No doubt McGonagall is thrilled to have one of the most talented professors in wizarding history returning to the school," said Scrimgeour, fussing with his plum-colored robes.

"Indeed, she has expressed to me her *extreme* gladness over my decision," said Snape, looking to Harry as he said this.

"Excellent, excellent. But, where will she house you, I wonder? After all, I hear Miss Black has taken over the Slytherin flat, and yours has yet to be prepared. Hopefully McGonagall has made adequate arrangements for you."

Snape smiled purposefully in Harry's direction and declared, "Oh, you needn't worry, Minister. I've actually just been to see Professor McGonagall. She's managed some rather *compelling* accommodations for me. I'll be quite comfortable. In fact, I'm due to move my things into my temporary residence within the hour, and then I'll be meeting with Miss Black to discuss our essential roles as co-heads of the Slytherin house."

"Oh, well, in that case, perhaps you ought to take your seat on the witness stand. They're ready whenever you are, Severus. Mr. Malfoy should be along at any moment. The director of the prison owed me mere moments ago to inform me they'll be traveling here by means of the Floo Network. We'll just ask that you take your oath and officially present your evidence for procedural purposes, you know, and then Mr. Malfoy will be free to go," said Scrimgeour.

"Indeed, Minister. I shall be along in a moment," said Snape.

"Very well. I'll see you inside," said Scrimgeour pleasantly. Then, turning to the others and holding out a handful of scrolled parchment he said, "Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter, here are your court documents so that you can follow along. You will be positioned along the outskirts of the courtroom and will be expected to remain throughout the trial. I'm sure Tonks can handle showing you inside," said Scrimgeour.

"Of course, Minister. It's not a problem," said Tonks.

"Excellent. Well, I reckon I'll see you lot in a few moments then," said Scrimgeour, addressing them with a subtle bow and pushing through the broad oak doors leading into the courtroom.

Snape's mouth curled into a purposeful smile as his onyx eyes swept over Harry and the others. In the wake of a sharp swirling of his robes, he spun arrogantly on his heels and strode away from them.

"*I don't believe him!*" hissed Hermione, watching as Snape cleared the crowd inside the courtroom and settled into his seat in the front center of the space. "You'd think he'd be a little more grateful to you for getting rid of Voldemort. If it wasn't for you, he'd still be under that wretched swine's control. I can't believe he actually thinks *he* did all the work!"

Harry clung to Snape's every move. He felt entirely sickened by Snape's alarming proclamation.

"I should owl Hannah, straight away. I think she needs to know about him returning to Hogwarts," said Harry anxiously.

"There's no time, Harry," interjected Tonks. "The trial is set to begin. If you leave now, you won't be able to re-enter the courtroom; it'll be sealed. Scrimgeour won't look too kindly on you leaving your post for such a frivolous purpose as sending an owl to your girlfriend. Besides, Hannah can handle Severus Snape. She knows him better than she knows herself."

"That's what worries me," said Harry, unintentionally aloud. His face burned a bright crimson as he collected the intent condoling stares from the rest of his group.

"You're not worried...are you? I mean, you don't think she'll, you know, be tempted to get back with that bumbling git, do you?" inquired Ron, eyeballing Harry intently.

Harry gulped.

"*Absolutely not, Ron!*" hissed Hermione, affronted, slapping at Ron in dissent.

"Hannah *loves* Harry. She's set to marry him!" Turning to confront Harry, Hermione continued firmly, "Don't you think on it for one more moment, Harry. Snape's just trying to rattle you, that's all. Hannah's made her choice to be with *you*. She loves *you*."

"I suppose you're right," said Harry, in a clear unconvincing effort at maintaining his calm.

"Come, you lot, let's go inside," said Tonks, steering them into the courtroom.

"*Hello, Potter,*" snarled a familiar arrogant male voice amongst the loud reverberation of a heavy rattling of chains.

Harry swung around to greet this voice and caught sight of a dreadfully bedraggled version of Draco Malfoy standing between two burly guards. Draco's once slickly groomed flaxen hair, pale, pointed, but handsome face, and his formerly dapperly

dressed self was no more. His new complexion was sallow, dirt-ridden, and heavily marred with prominent brush burns and abrasions. His hair was mangled and outgrown, and he sported a thick unkempt soiled beard. In place of his couture-fitted robes, he donned a set of filthy brown and beige inmate rags that hung loosely from his emaciated frame. Heavy silver-banded shackles capped his gaunt, paper-white wrists and ankles. He, quite probably, would have been deemed unrecognizable were it not for the unwavering tone of his voice and the smugness of his attitude, which, much to Harry's dismay, had remained precisely as they were the last time he had confronted him in Tom Riddle's Graveyard on the night Voldemort was destroyed.

"Malfoy," replied Harry, unruffled. "You look...Well, your appearance is definitely an improvement from before; I can tell you that much. Your choice of crappy attire goes rather nicely with your disposition," he added cheekily.

Draco's upper lip curled into a sneer as he countered Harry's retort. "So, you, Weaselby, and Granger are Aurors now, eh? *Humph!* Clearly, madam luck has found you lot. I can't imagine someone actually granting you such a premier post otherwise."

Harry grunted softly, forcing back his craving to send Draco on a one-way trip to the moon by the grace of his wand.

"Weasley, your family must be proud. Much like your father, you've managed to leech off someone else's success to bring in a *modest* pay packet. Rumor has it you've also managed to move into 'hotel Grimmauld' with mud-blood Granger, Lupin-the murderous werewolf, and the lot of those mud-blood loving, wolf-worshipping followers."

"Shove off, Malfoy!" said Ron, pushing boldly forward.

Draco smirked. Then, turning to face Lupin, he growled out low and eerily, "You best watch yourself *Werewolf*. Just because Voldemort's dead and his followers are in Azkaban, doesn't mean you're off the hook. I intend to see to it that you pay for murdering my father!"

"This way, Mr. Malfoy," said a stout looking court attendant, waving Draco and his two Azkaban escorts into the courtroom.

Draco turned his nose up at Lupin, Harry, and the others before following the lead of his guards and settling inside a pike-staffed cage across from Snape.

"Oh, Draco!" crowed a high-pitched crackling voice from the far reaches of the dark stone, torch lit space.

Harry followed this ear-splitting sound, catching sight of a distraught Narcissa collapsed on the floor to her knees and sobbing into Severus Snape's lap as he sat with a stoic expression in the witness chair. Tenderly, Snape combed his fingers through Narcissa's hair as she clung desperately to him after having been overwhelmed at the

sight of her caged and disheveled son. Her tear sodden face appeared heavily mottled beneath her once perfectly applied heavy makeup, which had been flushed away by the grace of her streaming tears. Her emotional show left her once stunning clear blue eyes a bloodshot and murky mudded blue, comparable to someone having stirred the bottom of a lake and polluting its clear waters with the muck lining the base of it.

"What's she going on about? She knows Draco's getting out today," said Ron callously, pointing at Narcissa.

"Read the court documents Scrimgeour handed you, Ronald!" snarled Hermione, smacking the back of the scrolled parchment he held in his hands. "Narcissa hasn't been permitted to see Draco since he was captured back in June."

"Oh. Oh, well, that explains it then," mumbled Ron, unfurling his documents and fingering through them. His eyes drew wide as he paged through them. "Harry, look at this!" he said, elbowing Harry in his side and flashing the pages in front of him.

"No way!" said Harry as he eyeballed the print on the pages.

Hermione leaned in to read the section they were fixed on. "Oh, my goodness!" she said with an astonished gasp. "That's just awful! I can't believe they're willing to take Snape's word after all this evidence about him has come forward!"

"That's the key, Hermione," said Tonks. "It's not evidence. It's just mere speculation, the word of fellow Death Eaters, whom Snape turned on. They're notorious for pinning all sorts of rubbish on one another in exchange for their own freedom."

"But, this one here," said Harry pointing his finger to the bottom of the page, "This statement was made by Bellatrix Lestrange. She'd never make something up just to save her own neck. Voldemort was like a god to her. She'd rather suffer the Dementor's kiss than turn on him, even in his death."

"Well, there you go, Harry. That piece of parchment is your saving grace!" said Ron. "Show that to Hannah and you'll never have to worry about her going back to Snape."

"Ronald Weasley!" hissed Hermione in reproach. "Harry would never use something so hurtful for such a self-serving purpose. Isn't that right, Harry?"

Harry started at the page for a lingering stretch before offering an emotionally wrought reply, "She's right, Ron. I-I just couldn't hurt her like that. She'd be devastated if she knew all this stuff about Snape. She loved him so much....even now...I know she still loves him."

"You're a bloody fool if you don't show her that paper!" said Ron in distain. "If it were me, I'd want to know."

"Honestly, Ronald, sometimes you can be so heartless!"

“What’s wrong with wanting to protect someone you love?”

“Protect? *Protect*?! How is showing Hannah this rubbish going to protect her?” snapped Hermione.

“It’ll show her what a bumbling git Snape really is, for one thing – that ruddy pumpkin head. I tell you –”

“Guys!” hissed Tonks.

“What?” snarled Ron.

“Would you lot settle down! The trial’s started!”

“Right,” said Ron, clearing his throat.

Hermione eyed him rudely before shaking out her head and lending her full attentions to the head Wizengamot, Rufus Scrimgeour, as his voice rang out loudly, “Order! May I have order in the courtroom, please!” He sat in the front center of a raised circular theatre seated balcony, overlooking them, surrounded by nearly fifty other members of the Wizengamot who were all dressed in their signature plum-colored, judicial robes embroidered with a silver *W*. “Is the Court Scribe fully prepared to document the proceedings of this trial?” he called down the row to Percy Weasley.

“Indeed, I am sir,” said Percy, sitting importantly near the edge of the front, lower left row, with a look of eagerness about him. His eyes flashed wildly in anticipation beneath his horn-rimmed glasses as he hunched readily over a large piece of golden parchment with the tip of his feathered quill pointed at the page.

“Very well,” started Scrimgeour with a sharp clearing of his throat. “Wizengamot Trial number 16697: The wizarding people against Mr. Draco Malfoy, the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1998. Head Wizengamot, Rufus Scrimgeour, presiding over the interrogation, Mr. Percy Weasley acting as the Court Scribe. Witness for the defendant: Mr. Severus Snape. Now then, on with the charges,” said Rufus, rustling through a pile of documents strewn out before him. Slipping one of the papers out from near the bottom of the pile, he read it over briefly, and then continued speaking. “Mr. Malfoy, you are hereby charged with the following criminal offenses: Three counts of the attempted murder of Albus Dumbledore by virtue of tainting mead with poison, then by means of a deadly curse stowed away inside an enchanted necklace, and, finally, by virtue of the intention to perform the Avada Kedavra Killing Curse on him. In addition, you are charged with multiple counts of magical manipulation by having placed the Imperius Curse over one Madam Rosmerta for the purpose of utilizing her as your personal spy and forcing her to distribute the afore mentioned cursed necklace to a student for the intended purpose of transporting the deadly article to Albus Dumbledore. Furthermore, you are charged with one count of magical manipulation and one count of endangerment by having placed the Imperius Curse over Katie Bell for the purpose of forcing her to transfer said

cursed necklace directly to Dumbledore, which nearly resulted in her death. Other charges against you include the aiding and abetting of known Death Eaters by secretly allotting them access to Hogwarts, whereby Mr. Gibbon, a fellow Death Eater, met his demise. Moreover, I have just received an urgent owl by one Hannah Black, which consists of her sworn testimony stating that you sexually assaulted her in the potions supply cupboard at Hogwarts on March 3, 1997, as well as in Mr. Severus Snape's home, in the early morning hours of August 7, 1997. She has waived her right to testify in person on her behalf, deeming her public testimony would prove too emotionally encumbering to her mental health."

Harry turned to address Ron, Hermione, Lupin, and Tonks and whispered in bewilderment, "Hannah didn't mention a thing to me about sending that document!"

"Harry, it sounds to me as though it was a last minute decision. Scrimgeour just said it was delivered by urgent owl. After all, none of us knew about Draco's trial until this morning," said Tonks quietly.

Harry scoffed lightly in frustration and returned his attentions to the Wizengamot.

Scrimgeour had folded his hands and had proceeded to rattle off nonchalantly, "These said Charges constitute multiple offences under paragraphs A and B, sections 1-22, as well as paragraphs G and H, sections 6 - 20 for the International Decree against Manipulative Magic, Magical Assault, Attempting an Unlawful Death by Magical Means, The Aiding and Abetting of Known Criminals, and the Corruption and Endangerment of a Fellow Wizard. Mr. Malfoy, how do you plead?"

"Not guilty by virtue of being a victim of the Imperius Curse implemented by Voldemort," said Draco resolutely.

A low rumbling of boos and disgruntled hisses erupted from the spectators in the courtroom. Harry turned to see Katie Bell, Madam Rosmerta, and their families looking on in aversion over Draco's reply. Their vocal protests were by far the loudest and most animated of all those following the proceedings.

Narcissa, who was now settled beside Snape, let out a muffled scream of despair into her fragile, shaking hands as she looked to her son and acknowledged the crowds' obvious skepticism and lack of support for his claim. She nestled her head in Snape's shoulder and began to sob wildly into it to which he responded kindly by cradling his arm consolingly around her and shushing her quietly.

"Mr. Malfoy, it is my understanding that you have your own council as well as a witness who can attest to your claims of being thwarted by the Imperius Curse. Am I correct in my discernment?"

"Yes," answered Draco simply.

“So, you’re indicating that the afore mentioned transgressions were performed solely as a result of your having been placed under the Imperius Curse by Voldemort? None of them occurred by means of your own free will?”

“That is correct, Minister.”

“And it is on your word that you swear this before the Wizengamot?”

“Pardon me, Minister Scrimgeour,” interjected Snape, “but, all questions regarding Mr. Malfoy should kindly be directed to me, as it is I who have been appointed Mr. Malfoy’s council and his official spokesperson.”

“Certainly, certainly, Mr. Snape,” said Scrimgeour in a painfully obvious attempt at addressing him professionally, rather than like an old school chum.

“Minister Scrimgeour, witches and wizards of the Wizengamot, it is on my word of honor that I officially affirm all deviant acts performed by Mr. Malfoy from August of 1996 to May of 1997 were the direct result of him suffering from the ill effects of the Imperius Curse implemented on him by Lord Voldemort. You will note, Minister Scrimgeour, that attached to my full sworn testimony are the avowed testimonies of numerous other Death Eaters who have confirmed my word and –”

“THIS IS AN *OUTRAGE!*” howled an infuriated woman from the center of the courtroom.

Harry turned to discover the witch behind the angry outburst and found Katie Bell’s mother, Winifred Bell, to be the source.

Winifred’s dark wavy hair sprouted randomly from her head like leaves on a tired willow and her once tiny, kind facial features now appeared warped in the wake of endless waves of silent torment. Her lean arms were punched downward crossly at her sides hugging her wasted frame, while her hands remained tight-fisted and pumping along fiercely as she continued to shout out, “Draco Malfoy was no more under the Imperius Curse than I am a Death Eater! *How dare you* lot allow for such an obvious distortion of justice at the meager word of Severus Snape and his gaggle of wretched Death Eater cronies! That monster, Draco, nearly killed my Katie, and he manipulated countless others of his own accord! So help me, Merlin, if you so much as –”

“SILENCE, MRS. BELL, or I’ll find you in contempt and have you removed from this courtroom!” howled Scrimgeour.

Mrs. Bell instantly snapped her mouth shut, her expression fixed in both ire and distress. Her chest heaved erratically as she struggled to calm her billowing nerves. Finally, after several intense moments, she settled begrudgingly in her seat, her lips pursed, and her hazel eyes situated coldly on Draco and Snape.

"Now, Mr. Snape, the testimony we have obtained from both you and your fellow Death Eaters offers us substantial evidence which clearly indicates that Mr. Malfoy was forced into his misdeeds by virtue of Voldemort's implementation of the Imperius Curse. We thereby fully accept this evidence as just and viable. However, it does not defend the new charges of assault that have been brought against him by Hannah Black. How do you intend to dispute them? In her documented testimony, Ms. Black clearly indicates that you bore witness to *both* events."

Snape winced slightly and paused briefly as he gathered his thoughts.

"Minister Scrimgeour," he started smoothly. "Indeed, I acknowledge that Ms. Black and Mr. Malfoy experienced two rather unpleasant encounters between them, brought on by Mr. Malfoy's unwavering attraction to Ms. Black. However, I assure you, the events were merely a result of a simple misunderstanding. In other words, they were more of a spat than an actual crime."

"That's total rubbish!" snarled Harry in objection. "I know for a *fact* that Malfoy brutally attacked Hannah! He chained her up and ripped off her clothes and everything! I saw her just after she was attacked! She was a wreck! Snape knows this! He was the one who burst in and stopped Draco just before he managed to rape her last summer!"

Harry watched as every eye in the courtroom instantly settled attentively on him, including those of Hermione and Ron. Harry's breathing was rampant, his expression raging with a blinding fury, his teeth clenched. Snape turned to address him with a composed look of amusement that was nearly devastating to him.

"Mr. Potter? Do you have some form of evidence you wish to present the Wizengamot to support your claims?" inquired Scrimgeour with interest.

"I most certainly do!" said Harry defiantly.

"You do?" replied Scrimgeour indulgently. "Then, by all means, Mr. Potter, please step forward and present your case."

Narcissa clung to Snape with an intense anxiety, a world of unadulterated tears stinging her weary blue eyes, while soft moans of despair continued to escape her quivering lips. Snape's upper lip twitched in aversion as he addressed Harry's determined temperament.

Harry stormed heatedly toward the front of the room, growling at Snape in disdain as he passed him on the way to his approaching the bench of the Wizengamot.

"Mr. Potter, you say you were with Ms. Black on the afore mentioned early morning hours of August the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, panting heavily.

"Indeed. And you say her clothes were...*torn*?"

"Yes – her gown – it was ripped down the front."

"Mm-hmm...Did she tell you what happened, Mr. Potter?"

"Well...not at first," answered Harry hesitantly.

"Not at first?" echoed Scrimgeour, slightly puzzled.

"Well, no sir. As you well know, she was acting as a double agent. She was trying to hide from me the fact that she was actually at Snape's house, and –"

"Mr. Potter, please just answer the question."

"I am!" said Harry heatedly. "I'm trying to explain to you WHY Hannah didn't tell me what truly happened to her that night!"

Scrimgeour straightened out and said, "Ah-ha! So, you're admitting that she didn't actually tell you she was attacked?"

"Well, no...I mean, not that night. I found out the truth later," said Harry.

"You *found out* the truth...*later*?"

"Well, yeah, by use of my Legilimency, months later, I discovered what really happened to her."

"Let me rephrase my question, Mr. Potter. On the morning of August 7, 1997, did Ms. Black reveal to you that she was attacked by Mr. Malfoy earlier that morning?"

"No...as I said before, not that morning. I broke into her mind several months later. We were fighting, you see, and I saw – well, I saw the images –"

"Mr. Potter, please. I realize Ms. Black is your fiancée and that you wish to protect her good name. However, you have yet to offer the Wizengamot anything further than mere speculation. You've even admitted to us *twice* that Ms. Black never actually told you she was attacked on the night in question."

"You're not listening to me! She did! She did tell me, after I broke into her mind, and –"

"MR. POTTER!" interjected Scrimgeour impatiently. "*Do you, or don't you* have substantial evidence to present to us to *prove* that indeed Ms. Black was attacked by Mr. Malfoy on the early morning hours of August the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997?"

"I told you, I saw her gown! It was torn wide open down the front. She was covered in filth and splashes of this pink stuff...a love potion –"

"A Love Potion?" retorted Scrimgeour skeptically.

"Yes. Draco was trying to make her drink it so that he could have her all to himself, you see. He wanted her to love him. He was obsessed with her."

"Mmm-hm. So, Ms. Black told you this?"

"Well, not straight away, no. As I told you before, I had to force the truth out of her."

"You had to *force* the truth out of her?"

"Yes! By means of my Legilimency, months later, as I told you twice before!"

Scrimgeour groaned and rubbed his temples in frustration as he eyed Harry over with disbelief.

"Mr. Potter, it might interest you to know that today alone, the Wizengamot has more than a dozen hearings to try with regard to deciding the fate of the remaining Death Eaters. This is surely going to make for a long day for the lot of us. If you do not have *sufficient evidence* to present us to support Ms. Black's accusations, I kindly ask that you step aside so that we may vote on Mr. Malfoy's fate."

"But I do have evidence! I just told you that I saw her right after it happened! She was a mess!"

"**MR. POTTER!**" roared Scrimgeour. Then, clearing his throat and calming his explosive frustration, he continued, "Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to tell us *exactly* what happened on the date in question? Starting from the moment you first saw her. And *please* — spare us your incessant ramblings about Legilimency and flashes of images you saw months down the line. Just state the *facts* about what happened *that* morning you saw her."

Harry straightened out, and in a valiant attempt at defending Hannah's honor, he recited, moment by moment, the grueling details requested by Scrimgeour.

"Well, it's like this: I caught Hannah entering the kitchen of the secret room of Grimmauld Place shortly after three a.m. on August 7, 1997. She was flustered and winded, and she looked upset. I asked her why she had wandered off at such a strange hour. I thought, perhaps, it was because she was upset with me for kissing her earlier that evening during my Occlumency lesson. Anyway, she told me that she couldn't sleep and that she had gone for a bit of a stroll, and —"

"Wait, wait a minute, Mr. Potter. Did you just mention that you, too, made a pass at Ms. Black that evening?"

"Not on purpose! It was an accident!"

"An *accident*, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, yeah. Like I said before, she was teaching me Occlumency and it just sort of...happened."

"Ah-ha," said Scrimgeour, scratching at his chin. "So, what happened, exactly? Did you slip and fall during this lesson and your lips just *happened* to connect with hers?"

The other members of the Wizengamot sniggered as they waited Harry to complete his testimony.

"No!" spat Harry, incensed. "I performed an Inferno Hex on her to block her from breaching my mind during the lesson. The spell I performed burnt her arm. I was trying to help heal it, and I just sort of...kissed her. She pulled away from me and took off running to the other side of the room."

"Ah-ha. And what did Ms. Black do next?"

"She went to sleep."

"She went to sleep?" echoed Scrimgeour indulgently.

"Yes."

"Did she seem upset?"

"Wh – no, no, not upset – a bit rattled, but not upset."

"Did she *say* anything to you about the incident, Mr. Potter?"

"Well – she – erm – she said that it was okay. That it was an emotional time for both of us and that she had – sort of forgotten herself."

"*Forgotten* herself, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, you know, she sort of got lost in the moment of our kiss."

"Indeed. Now, what exactly gave you the indication that Ms. Black was upset with you if she told you she wasn't?"

"I just, I thought she was! It was the only explanation that I could think of for her being out at such a strange hour later that same night! But, that's not the point!" said Harry in frustration.

"It's not?"

"NO, it's not!"

"Then, by all means, Mr. Potter, please entertain us with one. As you can see, we've been waiting patiently for you to make your position clear to us for the past five minutes."

Several members of the Wizengamot sniggered and Snape let out an arrogant chuckle. Narcissa, however, appeared more distraught than ever as she proceeded to chew apart her fingernails while passing her glance anxiously between Harry and the Wizengamot.

Harry clenched his teeth and ground them together in frustration as several people in the courtroom began to mutter.

Scrimgeour motioned for the room to come to order, and then he said, "Okay, Mr. Potter, why don't you take it from where you say Hannah had gone for a stroll."

Harry exhaled sharply and continued, "Alright, so, as I mentioned before, when I asked Hannah where she'd been, she said she'd taken a walk because she couldn't sleep. Then, she walked from the secret kitchen, into the secret room and removed her cloak."

"She removed her cloak?"

"Yes. It was a chilly evening and she was wearing a black cloak over her gown."

"I see. And what happened after she removed her cloak?"

"She was left standing there in her torn and filth-ridden gown and there were all these pink marks all over her."

"Pink marks?"

"Yes. They were from the love potion that Draco was trying to make her drink."

"And how did you come to such a conclusion, Mr. Potter? Did Ms. Black tell you this?"

"No, it's as I said before. I saw it when —"

"Ah, ah, ah, Mr. Potter, just the facts presented to you on the evening of August 7, 1997, please!"

Harry exhaled loudly in frustration.

"Tell us what happened after you noticed the pink marks on Ms. Black," said Scrimgeour.

"I pointed to them. I asked her what was going on. I inquired about why her gown was torn and why she was such a mess."

"And what was Ms. Black's reply?"

"Wh— she — she said she fell and smashed a bottle of raspberry liquor she'd been drinking. She said her gown got caught on the cupboard hatch and that it tore."

"I see. Ms. Black told you she'd been drinking?"

"Well, she wasn't really. She just said that because —"

"Mr. Potter, just answer the question. Did Ms. Black tell you that she'd been drinking?"

"Yes," answered Harry hesitantly.

"So, in essence, it's quite probable that she was intoxicated and her mind could have misjudged the earlier entire encounter between her and Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps she *thought* that she was being brutally attacked by him, when really it was just a simple 'accident,' similar to the one that happened between you and her earlier that evening."

"Hannah was *not* intoxicated! And what happened between her and I was completely different! My kiss was *totally* innocent! I never intended her any harm! The instant she told me no, I stopped. Draco forced himself her! He chained her up and ripped off her clothes — "

"Mmm-hm. How exactly do you know this, Mr. Potter? Were you there to see how the events unfolded?"

"I told you, I saw it with my Legilimency!"

"Facts, *facts*, Mr. Potter!"

"Argh! I *am* stating the facts! I saw flashes of what happened a few months later by using Legilimency on her!"

"Mr. Potter, surely you understand the workings of Legilimency? It allows for the implementer to see their subject's thoughts from *their* point of view —"

"Wait a minute!" interjected Harry angrily. "What are you saying? That Hannah made it all up?"

"No, my goodness, no, not at all. Mr. Snape clearly indicated that indeed Ms. Black and Mr. Malfoy had a bit of a run in. No, I'm not saying she made it up by any stretch. I'm merely implying that perhaps her being intoxicated hampered her state of mind, you know, caused her to misjudge the situation, making it seem more than what it actually was."

"I told you Hannah was *not* intoxicated! And how can you misjudge someone being bound in shackles and *forced* to drink a love potion!"

"Did Ms. Black tell you such a thing? Did you see it happen?"

"I already told you I saw it happen!"

"Through the use of your Legilimency, months later?"

"YES!"

"Although, on the night in question, Ms. Black told you she fell, that she tore her gown on the hatch of the kitchen cupboard."

"I told you why she said that! She couldn't very well go telling me what happened to her that night, at that particular moment, or else I would've discovered she was a spy –"

"Mr. Potter," interjected Scrimgeour. "If indeed Ms. Black was attacked on the night in question, why is it that she did not report the incident to Ministry officials? *We* knew of her double agent status."

"Because, it would've blown her cover! You lot would've stormed in and apprehended Malfoy, and Voldemort would have known straight away that something was off with Hannah. None of the Death Eaters ran to the ministry for assistance with their own kind! That was considered taboo – bloody suicide – everyone here knows that! *Voldemort* was their master! *He* was the one they went to with regards to all grievances, not you lot! You know as well as I do that he would have done *nothing* to right such a terrible wrong, and Hannah would have been left with more enemies than you could imagine! The Malfoy's were among the most revered members of that group! Hannah was no fool! She –"

The heavy pounding of a large gavel, which had been bewitched to tap madly against a wooden plate, instantly stopped Harry's ranting. The room began to swarm with low and steady rumblings, and Harry was left seething at the sight of Scrimgeour's impassive composure. The Minister was now leaning forward with his hands clasped together, his yellowish, wire rim spectacle covered eyes gripping Harry absorbedly. Harry swallowed hard in an attempt to eradicate his blossoming anguish.

*Had he ruined Hannah's chance to achieve justice? Did he make her look like a drunken fool? Should he not have said anything? No...no he was doing the right thing. He was certain of it. He was telling the truth, and the truth needed to be told...all of it.*

Unfortunately, Scrimgeour didn't see it that way. On the contrary, the longer Harry stood before him, the more agitated Scrimgeour appeared to become. Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime of agonizing silence, Scrimgeour ruffled his mane of grey-streaked tawny hair with the fingers of his right hand as he spoke in a soft, but firm tenor, "The Wizengamot thanks you for your testimony, Mr. Potter. Now, if you will kindly return

to your post in the rear of the room, we shall take a moment to review the evidence we have acquired, and we will cast our votes.”

“B-but—”

“*THANK YOU, Mr. Potter,*” drawled Scrimgeour, more forcibly, his expression bold and near savage.

Harry grunted and glanced uncomfortably about the courtroom. All eyes were on him: Some were transfixed, while others had lent him empathetic stares. Katie, Madam Rosmerta, and their families appeared entirely distraught. Both Draco and Narcissa were eyeing Harry with the coldest expressions of unbounded loathing. Perhaps, worst of all was Severus Snape’s smug look of superiority that literally burst at the seams in its longing to parade about the room in triumph. Harry swore for an instant that Snape had opened his mind up to him in order to deliver the final crushing blow, a little telepathic message that only he and Snape were be privy to: *The chosen one’s seventeen years of fame have finally come to an end, Potter! My word is gold, now!*

Harry’s nostrils flared like that of a wild bull. Had it not have been for Hermione, who, unbeknownst to him, had crept slowly forward in her mission to reach him and edge him gently toward the back of the room with her, Harry would’ve ravaged Snape right then and there in front of the entire Ministry.

Before Harry realized, he had been shepherded back to his initial post, and he heard the resonant sound of the gavel as it met the wooden plate.

“All those in favor of clearing Mr. Malfoy of all charges?” boomed Scrimgeour’s voice.

Harry’s eyes shot up. His head began to spin as he counted the ocean of hands in the air. The vote was unanimous. *Every single member* of the Wizengamot had his or her hand in the air.

Narcissa Malfoy screamed in exaltation.

“**NO!**” crowed Mrs. Bell, shooting up from her chair and throwing handfuls of court documents into the air. “This is *preposterous!* It’s an *outrage*, I tell you! An *absolute outrage!* How could you unleash that monster and allow him to roam our streets again?! It’s barbaric – deplorable – unpardonable! I demand a retrial! I *demand* it!”

With that, the courtroom broke into sheer chaos. Several members of the crowd began to shout in harmony with Mrs. Bell’s explosive show of protest. The gavel beside Scrimgeour broke in half as a result of its incessant and frantic pounding on the plate.

“**ORDER! ORDER! I WILL HAVE ORDER IN THE COURTROOM, THIS INSTANT!**” bellowed Scrimgeour by virtue of the Sonorus Charm. He crossed his wand boldly in the air, as did several other members of the Wizengamot, casting silencing charms on all those who had a hand in the rowdy disturbance.

The room fell instantly silent with the exception of the screeching sound of chairs and rustling of parchment as the unruly spectators settled themselves bitterly back into their seats.

“The Wizengamot has made their decision and it is *final!* There will be no retrial. Mr. Malfoy has been cleared of all charges. Will the Court Scribe please note the time of the conclusion of this trial as five past 10 a.m. Mr. Malfoy, you are free to go. This court is adjourned! We’ll have a short recess, and then we shall resume with the next trial, the people against Mr. Rudolphus Lestrage.”

Following Scrimgeour’s brisk wave of his wand, the cage and shackles in which Draco had once been bound were released. Narcissa made a mad dash for her son, throwing her arms around him in elation. Snape followed after her, stepping up to Draco and shaking his hand in a congratulatory fashion. Draco made certain to flash Harry a wicked smile, which made Harry feel the sudden and insatiable urge to hit something.

“What rubbish!” said Ron, looking to Harry and the others. “They totally disregarded everything you said! I don’t believe it!”

“Hush, Ron!” snarled Hermione in dissension, elbowing Ron in the side and looking to him in condemnation.

Ron turned to Harry again and understood immediately the point Hermione was trying to make. Harry’s face was lathered beneath a rainbow of shame. It was quite apparent that he believed his words had ruined Hannah’s case against Draco.

Tonks immediately stepped forward and proclaimed, “Harry, don’t go blaming yourself for the Wizengamot’s ruling. Scrimgeour had his mind made up long before he went into that trial. You see how highly he reveres Snape. They act like a old school chums. I don’t believe there was anything you could’ve said in there that would’ve gotten Draco convicted.”

Harry shook his head in disagreement and snapped, “If Dumbledore were here, he would’ve seen to it that Draco was locked away for good! He would’ve made him pay!” Harry took one last look at the members of the Wizengamot, then at Draco, Narcissa, and Snape, and spun around heatedly, storming off into the corridor.

“Harry!” started Tonks, trotting after him and tugging briskly on his robes to bring him to a stop. “Harry, don’t do this to yourself. It’s not your fault. It’s no ones fault. Hannah did what she thought was right by keeping silenced about the event. She didn’t even tell *me* about it and I’m her family, her best mate. Harry –”

But, Harry wasn’t listening to Tonks’ reasoning. He jerked away from her and took to walking off again, livening his pace as he went.

“Harry, just where do you think you’re going? The next trial starts in ten minutes! Scrimgeour will have your head if you leave now!” hollered Tonks anxiously.

"I don't care! Tell him to sack me then! I'm going to warn Hannah about Snape and beg her forgiveness for screwing up in there. Besides, I don't want to work for a place that sets criminals free anyway!"

"Harry don't be daft!" squealed Hermione, chasing after him and tugging madly at his robes to slow him down. "This is why the Ministry needs you! It needs you to set things right, Harry! Malfoy is bound to screw up again at some point, and we'll be sure to be there to catch him when he does. Then he'll end up right back in Azkaban where he belongs! We'll get him, Harry. I promise you, we will. Think about how good it will feel when you are able to prove to the entire Ministry how wrong they were for letting Malfoy go free! Please, Harry! Listen to me *for once in your life!*"

Harry stopped dead in his tracks.

*Hermione's right, he thought. Malfoy is greedy and power hungry. He's bound to mess up eventually. And when he does, I'm going to be the one to march his sorry arse right into Scrimgeour's office! I'm going to be the one to say "I told you so", right to his face in front of all the members of the Wizengamot! Scrimgeour will be the one left looking like a fool, just like Fudge did when he tried to get me to shut up about Voldemort!*

"Fine, I'll stay," said Harry aloud. "But first I need to owl Hannah and warn her about Snape. It'll only take me a minute."

"Harry, it's pointless. Snape will get to Hogwarts long before your owl does. You can bet he'll go straight for her the instant he arrives there," said Tonks.

Harry gulped and said, "I can't just sit back and do *nothing!* She needs to know that I at least tried to warn her!"

"I could hand her the owl *personally*, if you'd like," came a coy response from behind them.

Harry, Hermione, and Tonks turned to catch sight of a rather pleased looking Snape standing before them with his fingers woven importantly together.

"That was a rather *moving* performance you offered us all in the courtroom, Mr. Potter. Such a *pity* your word wasn't taken seriously, even amongst your own colleagues," said Snape cuttingly.

Harry grimaced.

"Go to hell, SNAPE!" he retorted bitterly.

"Hm. I would, only I'm in quite a hurry. You see, I'm due at Hogwarts momentarily. I've a scheduled meeting with *Ms. Black.*"

"You *liar!*" snarled Harry. "She doesn't even know your teaching there!"

"Surely McGonagall's told her by now. If not, no harm done. I'm certain she'll be delighted to be working side by side with her former mentor, the love of her life, the one she gave her precious pearl to."

"I'm out of here!" roared Harry, shoving off in the direction of the lifts.

"I'll be sure and tell her to expect your owl!" shouted Snape ruthlessly.

"You truly are a nasty man, Severus!" hissed Tonks.

"You think so?" said Severus with a smug grin.

"I know so! How could you do such a thing to Hannah? How could you lie to the Wizengamot like that and let Malfoy walk after what he did to her! She loved you!"

Snape's bold grin slowly began to fade as Tonks continued to ridicule him.

"Let me ask you something, Severus. What do you intend to do once Hannah finds out about the sorted little affairs you carried out whilst you and she were together? And what do you think she'll say when she discovers you LIED under oath to see to it that her attacker was set free? Hm? You surely won't stand a chance with her then. You'll be lucky if she even allows you to come within a hundred meters of her!"

Snape frowned and said to Tonks hauntingly, "I'm not quite sure what it is you're accusing me of, Nymphadora. I'm merely trying to do my civic duty and return to the rewards of teaching at Hogwarts. I have no interest in rekindling my love affair with Hannah Black."

"Sure thing, Severus. You best watch your back. The truth always finds a way of coming out in the end. I'd hate to see you left with warts all over your face when it does. Hannah has quite a knack for placing Hag Jinxes over those who offend her. Even you wouldn't be able to conjure up a potion to remedy the effects of her elf magic."

Severus rolled his eyes and said, "Well, as much as I've so enjoyed this invigorating little chat, I've someplace to be. I do believe you've had your shot at trying to stall me long enough to give Harry's owl a chance to find Hannah before I do. Unfortunately for Harry, owls aren't permitted in the Potions Supply Cupboard, which is where I'm certain she'll be. So, do give my warmest regards to Mr. Potter when you see him again, and do let him know that Hannah will be *in good hands* whilst she is at Hogwarts. Good day to you." Severus strode off toward the lifts at a hurried pace.

Tonks grunted and called out after him, "You're going to be sorry, Severus! Mark my words!"

Snape waved her off and disappeared into one of the lifts....