

Chapter 31

Harry, Bellatrix, and Narcissa arrived at the Ministry of Magic bright and early on Monday morning. Lily had wanted to come with them, but her grandfather had broken his hip after a bad fall. She and her family were going to stay with them for a couple of days to make sure he was alright now that he was out of hospital.

Making their way through the Atrium, Harry and the girls checked their wands in at the security desk before making their way to the elevators. He noticed a bit more attention being paid to him, and oddly, he didn't mind so much. This time, it wasn't because of some accident of magic he could barely remember. Now, he was well known because of things he'd intentionally set out to accomplish.

It was funny how that made a difference.

As they stepped out into the Auror offices, a few people looked at him curiously, whispering to their neighbors before returning to their work. Harry was looking around for Moody when he noticed Crouch step out of his office. Smoothing out his tie, he made to step in their direction.

"Harry!"

David walked over to them with a smile, deliberately not looking in towards Crouch.

"Hey, David," Harry said, shaking his hand.

"I'm glad you could make it," David smiled, clapping him on the shoulder and leading them through the offices. "Moody's already waiting for you in the training room. I'm surprised you have time for this with everything going on."

"There's not much to do now but wait until the next full moon," Harry shrugged. "Moody found out I agreed to help a couple of his trainees and pretty much ordered me to come in today."

“That sounds like Moody,” David chuckled.

Turning down a long, dark hallway, they walked nearly to the end and entered the last door on the right. Harry, Narcissa, and Bellatrix looked around at the rather sparse training room. Of the twelve witches and wizards that had started as Auror trainees, only eight were left. Jess, Sam, and two wizards were practicing their shields on one side of the room while a witch and three wizards were testing spells on training dummies. Marching around the room with a perpetual frown, Moody barked out the occasional correction or insult, depending on how badly they screwed up.

“Finish up what you’re doing!” he shouted. “Potter’s here!”

Jess and Sam looked up in surprise, prompting Harry to smile and wave.

“How’s it going, Moody?” he asked, shaking the man’s hand.

“They’re still green,” Moody grumbled. “Crouch has us pushing them through too fast.”

“Why is he pushing them through so fast?” Narcissa asked curiously. “I thought Auror’s had two-year mandatory training.”

“They should,” David sighed. “We all know a fight is coming, but we don’t have the budget for more instructors. Crouch decided to just pass them through with less training.”

“Didn’t the DMLE just get a budget increase?” Harry asked, furrowing his brow.

Moody snorted derisively.

“Everyone but Bones voted to give themselves a raise,” he said, disgust dripping from his tone. “By the time management took their cut, there wasn’t enough left to make much of a difference.”

Closing his eyes, Harry took a slow, deep breath to quell his rising frustration.

“Narcissa?” he called. “Can you look into the laws about starting a private security company?”

“You want to build your own army?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“No,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “The politics of that would be a nightmare. We’ll just start a private security company. We train them to fight, and if the DMLE wants to hire them, they can teach them the laws.”

“And once the war is over and the DMLE downsizes, we can employ them,” Narcissa said, her eyes gleaming excitedly.

“That’s not a bad idea,” David said, nodding thoughtfully. “The only problem I could see would be Crouch and possibly the Wizengamot.”

“I can deal with that,” Narcissa said confidently.

“Moody, do you know any retired Aurors willing to teach?” Harry asked.

“I might know a few,” he said with a nod. “I’ll ask around and let you know.”

Harry nodded gratefully as the trainees finished their exercises and circled around them.

“Right,” Moody said, clapping his hands loudly. “Last time we were at Hogwarts, you got a little taste of what it’s like to duel someone powerful. During the war with Grindelwald, we managed to corner the bastard a few times. Every time we did, he kicked our arses and managed to escape. Usually, killing a few people in the process.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, Moody paced back and forth in front of the trainees. He met each of their gazes with a stony stare.

“I can’t teach you to beat someone like that,” he continued. “That’s all about being the right person in the right place, at the right time. What I can do, is give you the skills that *might* help you survive.”

Pausing, Moody let those words sink in before continuing, “Your task is to capture Potter. I expect you to fail.”

“Then what’s the point of doing this if we can’t win?” one of the wizards asked.

“Because, Dalton, one day, some bureaucrat is going to decide their career is more important than your life,” Moody growled, glaring hard. “They’ll tell you you’re going after someone important, but it won’t be until you get there that you realize it’s Voldemort himself you’ll be facing. You’ll be trapped in a room with a monster you can’t possibly handle, and what you learn here today might just be the only thing that keeps you alive.”

Dalton swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he stared at Moody wide-eyed.

“As much as I hate to admit it, Moody’s right,” David added. “I’ll try to protect you from something like that as best I can, but I can only go off of the information I’m given. I promise you, I would never knowingly send my Aurors into a situation like that.”

“Let’s get to work,” Moody barked, moving off to the side of the room.

David and the girls followed after him while Harry stood in the center of the room. Slowly, the trainees started to spread out and circle him cautiously.

“Begin!” Moody shouted.

“Expelliarmus!” yelled one of the wizards.

Harry turned and raised an eyebrow at the young man who watched, stunned, as the Holly wand leapt out of Harry’s pocket and into his hand.

“S-show me your hands! Now!” the wizard shouted, the tip of his wand trembling.

Slowly, Harry raised his hands and held them out away from his body, one splayed out towards the wizard.

“Like this?” he asked calmly.

The young man nodded, then nearly lost his grip on his wand. Gripping it tightly in both hands struggled not to lose his grip as Harry Summoned it.

“Do something!” he shouted, desperately trying to dig his heels into the floor as he was pulled inexorably forward.

A shield sprang from Harry’s other hand, easily protecting him from the rather basic spells the others shot at him. He chuckled to himself when he heard Moody grumbling under his breath, inadvertently terrifying the young man he was dragging towards him even more.

As soon as he was within arm’s reach, Harry stopped pulling. Without a force pulling his hands forward, the trainee’s fists smashed into his own face and sent him sprawling on his back. With a smirk, Harry summoned his own wand from the man’s robes and caught it deftly. A flick

Stunned the young man into unconsciousness before he turned to the others. Quickly, he animated the four training dummies and set them to attack the trainees. They couldn't actually cast spells, unfortunately, but they worked as a distraction and were nearly indestructible to magic.

Harry stunned one witch and then tied a wizard up with his own cloak. By the time he'd knocked out the third trainee, Sam had figured out that a Sticking Charm on the wheel of the training dummy would hold it in place. Jess and the other two wizards followed her lead before turning their full attention back to Harry.

"Not bad," he smiled. "But it still took you too long."

Jabbing his wand forward, there was a loud *bang*, and the trainees were sent flying backward, where they landed painfully. Before they could get back to their feet, Harry stuck one of the wizards to the floor and disarmed him. Smirking, he used the same trick on the other wizard that Professor McGonagall had used on him nearly a year earlier.

The young man's eyes went wide as the stone under his feet turned to liquid and he plummeted. As soon as his head breached the surface, Harry turned it back into stone, trapping him in place. His wand was still in his hand, but from the panicked look on his face, Harry didn't think he knew how to reverse the spell.

Back on their feet, Sam and Jess, the only two left standing, eyed him warily. Grinning, he held his hand out in front of him and made a 'bring it on' motion with his fingers. Sam looked uncertain, but a look of determination came over Jess's face. Tightening her grip on her wand, she lunged forward, attacking relentlessly. Sam followed a moment later, a sting of Charms, Hexes, and Curses spitting from her wand.

Harry parried, deflected, and twisted gracefully out of the way of everything they sent at him with ease. Jess had certainly improved since the last time he'd dueled her, and though he hadn't dueled Sam the last time they met, she was just as good as her friend.

Slowly, Jess moved to his right while Sam moved to his left. They wanted to force him to deal with attacks from two different directions, splitting his focus. Harry let them get into position for just a moment before pulling Sam toward him with a flick of his wrist. With a scream, she flew over his back just as he ducked. Jess's eyes widened and she stopped casting at Harry to catch the redhead in her arms. Sam's momentum caused them to tumble to the floor.

"That's enough!" Moody shouted.

Walking around the room, he Re-ennervated and freed the trainees. Slowly, they all got to their feet, rubbing their bruises and grumbling as they formed a line.

"What the hell was that?" Moody asked, marching back and forth in front of them.

"He's too strong," one of the wizards complained.

"That's the point, Turpin," Moody barked. "You know how powerful he is, and you thought it was a bright idea to try and disarm him?"

Turpin blushed and looked down. With a grunt, Moody resumed his pacing.

"And the rest of you," he continued. "Not one of you cast a single spell beyond OWL level until four of you were on the ground. What the hell were you thinking? I know Potter's good looking, but you're not going to beat him by playing nice. He was playing with you! Look at him. He didn't even work up a sweat!"

All of the trainees looked away at the dressing down.

"This isn't a game!" Moody barked. "You need to be aggressive. Put him out of the fight as fast and as hard as you can. Now run it again. And this time, don't be such pussies."

Stomping back over to the wall, he leaned over to talk to David while Harry waited for the trainees to get back into position.

“Begin!”

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Four hours later, Harry was panting but smiling as the trainees gingerly got to their feet. Every last one of them winced and hobbled from the times they’d been thrown around the room. Despite not having landed a single spell on him, he was proud of their performance. Not one of them had given up, and they’d made an impressive amount of improvement in a short amount of time.

“Better,” Moody nodded. “I think we’ll call it for today. Go see the Healer and get some rest.”

“If you perform like this in your final exam, I don’t see any of you not making the cut,” David told them. “Good work.”

They perked up a bit at the praise but were too tired to react much.

“Jess, Sam, hold on for a minute,” Harry called as they gingerly limped their way to the door. “Do you two still want to come over this weekend?”

“You want us to do this again?” Jess asked incredulously.

Harry chuckled, “No. I was thinking about helping you with your dueling. I promise, I’m not nearly as sadistic as Moody.”

Jess looked at Sam, who gave her a hopeful look. With a sigh, she turned back to him.

“Sure,” Jess said tiredly.

“Great,” Harry smiled. “Sunday afternoon still work?”

“At the Wolf’s Den, right?” Sam asked, smiling when he nodded. “Perfect. We’ll see you then. Thanks, Harry.”

“You’re welcome,” he said as they made their way to the door, whispering quietly. “Hey, David, Moody. Do you two have time for lunch? I’m buying.”

“A good Auror never turns down a free lunch,” David grinned.

Moody grunted and followed Harry as he made his way back toward the office. They were discussing how the trainees performed and what they could learn to improve when he stopped suddenly. Harry stared incredulously as Abraxas and Lucius Malfoy walked out of Crouch’s office and headed for the elevator. Turning as they got in, they spotted him and sneered.

“What the fuck?” Harry asked as the door closed.

“I’ll find out what’s going on,” David frowned.

“Don’t bother,” Connie said, leaning against a cubicle. “Crouch and the Minister decided there wasn’t enough evidence to charge them. Apparently, they claim they were threatened by the Blacks.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry sighed, pushing up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“What about my parents?” Narcissa asked worriedly.

“They still have to go to trial,” Connie replied. “It looks like the Malfoys plan to put the full blame on the Blacks.”

“Lucius cast an Unforgivable,” Narcissa hissed. “That’s a mandatory life sentence.”

“His father is the only one that was hit, and he’s refusing to press charges,” Connie told her. “And Abraxas technically didn’t assault anyone.”

“Only because Harry wiped the floor with him,” Bellatrix scoffed.

Connie shrugged and sighed, “It’s times like this that I really hate being an Auror. Crouch is more interested in earning their support than putting them in Azkaban.”

“Come on,” Harry said, putting his glasses back in place. “Let’s go talk about this over lunch. I need to get out of here before I do something stupid.”

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Harry and the girls made their way back to Godric’s Hollow after they finished eating at the Leaky Cauldron with their friends from the Ministry. David said he was going to talk to the Minister, but none of them thought it would do any good. Though none of them said it aloud, they all knew that the next time they ran into the Malfoys, they wouldn’t get away unscathed.

As he was thinking of ways to deal with Crouch, they stepped into their home to a heartwarming sight. Lily had returned from her parents and was playing with Amanda and Alfie while Sylvia sipped a cup of tea.

“Hey,” Lily smiled, her hair disheveled as she looked up at them. “How did the training go?”

“Good,” Harry said. “Sam and Jess are going to meet us at the Wolf’s Den on Sunday so I can teach them some more dueling.”

“We also found out the Malfoys got released from the Ministry,” Narcissa sighed.

“What? Why?” Lily asked, her brow furrowed.

“Crouch and Bagnold said there wasn’t enough evidence to prosecute,” Narcissa told her.

“It’s a load of bullocks,” Bellatrix said.

“Language!” Lily and Narcissa yelled, causing Amanda to giggle.

“So, what brings you by, Sylvia?” Harry asked with a smile.

“I’ve been thinking about your offer to move in here,” she said, relaxing when he nodded encouragingly. “If the offer is still on the table, Amanda and I would like to take you up on it. I’d feel safer knowing you’re nearby if something happens.”

“We’d love for you to stay,” Harry grinned.

“Mummy?” Amanda asked.

“Yes, love?” Sylvia replied.

“Are you and Harry married now?” Amanda asked curiously.

Narcissa, Bellatrix, and Lily hid their smiles as Harry and Sylvia shared a glance.

“Well, I suppose it’s kind of like that, but not quite the same,” Sylvia told her hesitantly.

“Does that mean he’s my new daddy?” Amanda asked.

Harry tried to hide his shock at the question, but that didn’t stop the girls from seeing it. Narcissa, Bellatrix, and Lily burst into giggles and even Sylvia smirked at him.

“Er,” Harry stammered, taking a seat next to the little girl on the couch. “Do you want me to be?”

“You’re a lot better than my old daddy,” Amanda said, staring up at him with wide innocent eyes. “You don’t make mummy cry, and you always come back, even though you don’t live with us.”

“Aw,” Lily cooed.

“Well, if Harry’s alright with you calling him that...,” Sylvia said, looking at him cautiously.

“I don’t mind,” Harry smiled.

Amanda stood up and lunged at him, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck.

“I love you, daddy,” she said softly.

“I love you too, Amanda,” Harry said, hugging her tightly.

Sylvia beamed, tears glistening in her eyes. Harry felt his own eyes start to burn and cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Hey, how about I show you to your new room?” he asked.

“Okay,” Amanda said excitedly.

Letting go of him, she dropped back onto the couch, slid down to the floor, and took off toward the stairs at a run. Alfie, who’d been laying under the coffee table, barked and bounded after her.

“Amanda, wait,” Lily called. “You don’t even know where it is.”

She took off up the stairs after her, and they all heard a childish giggle a couple of seconds later. Bellatrix and Narcissa shared a look before silently heading upstairs, smiling. With a nervous smile, Sylvia got to her feet and ran her hands over her dress. Harry smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

“We set up a room for you, too. But I’m hoping mummy will come stay with me tonight,” he grinned.

Sylvia looked up at him and beamed, her eyes glistening. Standing up on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him softly.

“Mummy! Come look!” Amanda yelled.

Separating with smiles, Harry took Sylvia’s hand in his and led her upstairs to show her her new home.