

Chapter 43

The evening air was cold as Harry and Nym approached the Shrieking Shack. The dilapidated building loomed against the darkening sky, its broken windows and weathered boards giving it an ominous appearance. Harry had his wand in hand, though not raised. Beside him, Nym's hand rested casually near her own wand, her posture relaxed but ready.

"Still looks like it could collapse any second," Nym muttered, eyeing the structure skeptically.

"It's held up this long," Harry replied. "I guess that's not exactly reassuring either."

They'd already swept the area for magical signatures and found nothing suspicious beyond Remus's presence inside. Still, Harry felt up the emergency portkey in his pocket, a precaution everyone else had insisted on despite his gut feeling that this meeting was genuine.

The door creaked as Harry pushed it open. Inside, standing near the far wall with his hands visible and empty, was Remus Lupin. He looked tired, Harry noticed. More tired than usual, with dark circles under his eyes. His shoulders were tense, and Harry had a feeling that the man had not been sleeping well.

"Harry," Remus said quietly. "Thank you for coming."

"Remus." Harry's voice was neutral, carefully controlled. He stepped inside with Nym close behind, positioning themselves where they could see both Remus and the door. "You said you wanted to talk."

"I did. I do." Remus glanced at Nym, then back to Harry. "I wasn't sure you'd bring anyone."

"I'm not stupid," Harry said bluntly. "Things being what they are, meeting alone seemed like a bad idea."

Remus nodded slowly, looking somewhat pained. "I suppose I deserve that. I know we're on... different sides now."

"Are we?" Harry asked, his tone challenging. "Different sides would imply we're fighting for different things. Last I checked, we both want Voldemort dead."

"It's not that simple."

"It never is, apparently." Harry crossed his arms. "So why are we here, Remus? What did you want to discuss that couldn't be put in a letter?"

Remus was quiet for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. When he spoke, his voice was careful, almost hesitant. "I wanted to understand. I need to understand how things got to this point between you and Albus."

Harry laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You want to understand? Really?"

"Yes, really."

"And then what?" Harry's eyes narrowed. "You'll tell me I'm wrong? That I'm being unreasonable? That Dumbledore knows best and I should just fall in line like a good little soldier?"

"Harry —"

"Or maybe you'll listen, nod sympathetically, and then go right back to following Dumbledore's orders anyway. Because that's what you do, isn't it? That's what you've always done."

The words came out harsher than Harry had intended, but he didn't take them back. He was tired of pretending, tired of dancing around the truth.

Remus flinched as though he'd been struck. "Is that really what you think of me?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" Harry shot back. "You're part of the Order. You follow Dumbledore. Every decision he makes, every strategy he implements, you go along with it. Even when it's clearly not working."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it?" Harry challenged. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you've ever seriously questioned his methods."

Remus opened his mouth, then closed it. His expression was troubled, conflicted. "It's more complicated than you're making it sound."

"It always is," Harry said again, his voice hard. "Everything's always complicated when it comes to defending Dumbledore's decisions."

Nym had remained silent throughout the exchange, but Harry could feel her presence beside him. She was watching Remus carefully, noticing every shift in his body language.

"Harry, please." Remus's voice was almost pleading now. "I'm not here to defend Albus or to condemn you. I'm here because I genuinely don't understand what happened. You were close once. He trusted you, mentored you. And now..." He gestured helplessly. "Now you're practically at war with each other. Help me understand why."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. There was something in Remus's expression, a desperation almost, that made Harry reconsider his initial dismissal. Maybe Remus was genuinely trying to understand. Or maybe Harry just wanted to believe the only remaining friend of his parents apart from Sirius actually gave a damn about the truth.

"You won't believe me," Harry said finally.

"Try me."

"Even if you do believe me, you won't do anything about it. You'll find some way to justify it, to rationalize it, because that's easier than accepting what Dumbledore really is."

"Harry." Remus's voice was firm now, filled with what might have been disappointment. "Do you really think so little of me?"

Both Harry and Nym stared at him. Harry wanted to say yes, wanted to maintain his defensive walls and send Remus away with nothing. But something in the older man's eyes stopped him. There was hurt there, genuine hurt, and beneath it something that looked like desperate need to understand.

"I think," Harry said slowly, "that you're a good man who's been loyal to someone who doesn't deserve it. And I think that when I tell you the truth, you're going to struggle to accept it because it means questioning everything you've believed about him."

"Then tell me," Remus urged, taking a step forward. "Make me understand. Because right now, all I see is someone I care about making choices that terrify me, and I don't know why. I see you operating outside the law, killing Death Eaters, challenging the entire established order, and I can't reconcile that with the boy I knew. The boy James and Lily's son should have been."

"Don't." Harry's voice went cold. "Don't you dare bring my parents into this as some kind of guilt trip."

"That's not what I'm doing," Remus said quickly. "I'm trying to understand what changed. What happened to make you distrust Albus so completely. He's made mistakes, yes. We all have. But to go from his student to his enemy? There has to be a reason. A real reason, not just teenage rebellion or —"

"Teenage rebellion?" Harry's voice was dangerously quiet. "You think this is about rebellion?"

"I think you've been through more trauma than most people experience in a lifetime. I think that could affect your judgment. Make you see threats where there aren't any."

Harry laughed, and this time it was bitter. "There it is. I knew you'd find a way to dismiss what I have to say before I even said it. It's not that Dumbledore might actually be wrong. It's that I'm traumatized and not thinking clearly."

"That's not —" Remus stopped, taking a breath. "Alright. You're right. That was dismissive and unfair. I'm sorry." He moved to sit on an old crate, suddenly looking

even more exhausted. "Please, Harry. Just talk to me. Tell me what happened. I promise I'll listen without judgment."

Harry exchanged a glance with Nym. She gave him a small nod, leaving the decision to him. Taking a deep breath, Harry made his choice.

"Alright," he said. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

He moved to lean against the wall, finding a position where he could still see the door and Remus. Nym remained standing, her casual posture belying her readiness to react at a moment's notice.

"First year," Harry began, "the resident dark bastard possessed one of my professors and tried to steal a powerful magical artifact. I was eleven years old, and I had to face him alone in the depths of the school. Where was Dumbledore?"

"Harry, he arrived as quickly as he could –"

"Did he?" Harry interrupted. "Or did he wait to see if I'd succeed on my own? I almost died, after all, and if not for Mum's protective magic, I would've kicked the bucket."

"I'm sure –"

"Second year, students were being petrified by a monster in the school. A monster that had killed someone fifty years ago, that Dumbledore knew about. He knew what the Chamber of Secrets was, what lived down there. And when I went down to face it, where was the great Albus Dumbledore then? Fawkes arrived with the Sorting Hat and the Sword of Gryffindor, but what about some real help?"

Remus opened his mouth to respond again, but Harry wasn't finished.

"Third year, Dementors were stationed around the school. Creatures that affected me worse than anyone else because of my past. I was passing out, reliving my parents' deaths over and over. And yes, you taught me the Patronus Charm, and I'm grateful for that. But Dumbledore allowed those things near the school in the first place. He allowed them to patrol the grounds where students walked."

"The Ministry insisted –"

"The Ministry insists on a lot of things Dumbledore ignores when it suits him," Harry said sharply. "Don't pretend he didn't have a choice. Fourth year, someone entered me in a deadly tournament. A tournament that had been discontinued because too many people died. I had to face dragons, dark creatures, and eventually Voldemort himself. And through all of it, Dumbledore watched. He investigated, slowly, carefully, while I fought for my life."

Harry pushed off the wall, his voice rising with suppressed emotion. "That night in the graveyard, I watched Cedric die. I was tortured. I dueled Voldemort while his

Death Eaters watched. And when I got back, when I told everyone that Voldemort had returned, Dumbledore believed me. But he didn't protect me. He wanted to send me back to the Dursleys, to the same house where I'd been neglected and abused for years."

"He had reasons for that," Remus said quietly. "Blood wards –"

"Blood wards that required my mother's sacrifice," Harry said. "Yes, I know about those. But here's what I don't understand, Remus. Why not ensure I was actually cared for? Why not check on me even once during the years I lived in a cupboard under the stairs?"

Remus's face went pale. "A cupboard?"

"You didn't know?" Harry's voice was harsh. "Of course you didn't. Because Dumbledore never bothered to check. Never cared if I was happy or healthy or even safe. Just that I stayed alive until I was needed."

"That's not... he wouldn't have knowingly left you in an abusive situation."

"Wouldn't he?" Harry challenged. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like he left me there very deliberately. Left me isolated, unloved, desperate for acceptance. The perfect weapon, don't you think? Someone who'd be grateful for any scrap of affection, any sense of belonging. Someone who'd sacrifice anything for the wizarding world that represented everything he'd been denied."

Remus stood up abruptly. "Now you're just making accusations. You're taking a series of unfortunate events and constructing a conspiracy that doesn't exist."

"Am I?" Harry challenged. "I can give you my memory, of a conversation I had with Dumbledore. Want to see it? Want to hear him explain, in his own words, why he kept things from me? Why he raised me like a pig for slaughter?"

"A pig for slaughter," Remus repeated slowly. "That's a very specific phrase."

"It's an accurate one." Harry's voice was hard. "Every year, something tried to kill me. Every year, I faced something that should have ended my life. And every year, Dumbledore was conspicuously absent until after the danger had passed. Don't you find that strange? Don't you wonder why the most powerful wizard in Britain always seemed to arrive just a bit too late?"

"You think he was testing you," Remus said slowly, understanding dawning in his eyes. "Seeing if you'd survive."

"He was preparing me," Harry corrected. "Preparing me to die, and if I somehow survived, then it was about teaching me to face death without flinching. Because he knew, Remus. He's known since I was a baby what I was. What Voldemort made me. And he's been waiting for me to be ready to die."

"What Voldemort made you?" Remus's voice was sharp now. "What does that mean?"

Harry considered how much he should reveal. He couldn't tell Remus about Horcruxes. He couldn't risk that information getting out. But he needed Remus to understand enough to see the truth.

"That night in Godric's Hollow," Harry said carefully, "something happened. Something beyond Voldemort's body being destroyed. The magic involved was dark, ancient, and it connected me to him in ways I'm only beginning to understand."

"The scar," Remus said. "Your connection to him."

"Among other things." Harry chose his words carefully. "Dumbledore has known about this connection since the beginning. He's studied it, used it, and ultimately, he's concluded that for Voldemort to truly be defeated, I have to die."

The silence that followed was deafening. Remus stared at Harry as though seeing him for the first time, his face pale with shock.

"No," he said finally. "Albus would never —"

"Wouldn't he?" Harry's voice was sharp now, cutting through Remus's denial. "Think about it, Remus. Really think about it. Why else would he allow me to face so much danger? Why else would he keep me in the dark about so much? He told me himself that he cared about me too much, that he let his affection cloud his judgment. But you know what I realized? If he actually cared about me, he'd have tried harder to keep me safe. He'd have prepared me differently. He'd have found another way."

"There has to be more to it," Remus insisted, but his voice lacked conviction. "Some context we're missing. Albus has spent his entire life fighting dark wizards. He's dedicated everything to protecting people. He wouldn't just... sacrifice you. Not without a reason. Not unless there was absolutely no other choice."

"Or maybe," Nym interjected, speaking for the first time in minutes, "he's just a manipulative old man who got so caught up in his grand plans that he forgot the people he was supposed to be protecting."

Remus turned to her sharply. "You didn't know him before. You didn't see what he accomplished, what he's capable of. The good he's done —"

"Doesn't erase the bad," Harry finished. "That's what you need to understand, Remus. Good intentions don't justify everything. Being on the right side doesn't mean every decision you make is automatically right."

"So what are you saying?" Remus demanded. "That Albus Dumbledore, the man who defeated Grindelwald, who's fought against dark wizards for decades, is actually some sort of villain? That everything he's done has been part of some elaborate scheme to manipulate you?"

"I'm saying he's a man who decided a long time ago that he knew what was best for everyone," Harry said. "And once he made that decision, he stopped questioning himself. Stopped considering alternatives. Because admitting he might be wrong would mean admitting that all the sacrifices he's demanded might have been unnecessary."

"You're asking me to believe that someone I've known for over twenty years, someone who saved me when no one else would, is capable of this level of manipulation. Of coldly planning the death of his student."

"I'm not asking you to believe anything," Harry said. "I'm telling you what is. What you do with that information is up to you."

Remus paced across the small room, his movements agitated. "When I was young, lost, a werewolf with no prospects, Albus gave me a chance. He gave me an education, a purpose, a place in the world when no one else would even look at me. He's done the same for countless others. How can I reconcile that man with the one you're describing?"

"Maybe they're both real," Harry said quietly. "Maybe he genuinely does want to help people. But maybe he's also willing to sacrifice individuals for what he sees as the greater good. Those things aren't mutually exclusive, Remus. People are complicated. They can do good things and terrible things. They can be heroes and villains at the same time."

"That's too easy," Remus shot back. "That's just moral relativism. There has to be a truth here. Either Albus is who I think he is, or he's who you think he is."

"Why?" Harry challenged. "Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't it be both? Maybe he saved you because he genuinely wanted to help. And maybe he's been manipulating me because he thinks it's necessary. Both can be true."

Remus looked like he wanted to argue, but couldn't find the words. He sank back down onto the crate, his head in his hands.

"I don't know what to think anymore," he admitted. "Part of me wants to dismiss everything you've said as paranoia or misunderstanding. But another part... another part remembers things. Little things that didn't make sense at the time. Decisions Albus made that seemed strange. And I wonder if I just didn't want to see what was really happening."

"It's not your fault," Harry said, surprising himself with the gentleness in his voice. "He's good at this. At making people see what he wants them to see. At convincing them that his way is the only way."

"So what do I do now?" Remus asked, looking up at Harry. "Knowing what I know, suspecting what I suspect, what am I supposed to do with that?"

"That's your choice," Harry said. "I'm not going to tell you what to do. I'm not going to try to manipulate you into siding with me. That would make me no better than him."

"But you want something from me," Remus observed. "You agreed to this meeting for a reason."

Harry nodded slowly. "I want you to not stand in my way. I know the Order will likely oppose what I'm doing. Hell, they probably already do. But I don't want to fight you, Remus. I don't want to fight any of the good people in that organization who are genuinely trying to do the right thing."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I understand you have obligations. Relationships. History with these people. I'm not asking you to leave the Order or turn against Dumbledore. But I am asking you to stay out of my way. Let me fight this war my way, and you fight it yours. We're both after the same goal, after all. We both want Voldemort dead and people safe."

Remus studied him for a long moment. "You've changed, Harry. You're not the boy I remember from a few months ago."

"People change when they stop waiting for others to save them," Harry said simply. "When they realize that the adults they trusted don't have all the answers. That sometimes the people in charge are just as lost as everyone else, but better at hiding it."

"Is that what you think we are? Lost?"

"I think you're stuck," Harry said. "Stuck in old patterns, old strategies that aren't working. Voldemort is getting stronger while the Order debates and plans. People are dying while you wait for the perfect moment that might never come. And meanwhile, you're so focused on opposing Voldemort that you can't see there might be better ways to fight him."

"And you have those better ways?"

"I have different ways," Harry corrected. "Whether they're better remains to be seen. But at least I'm acting. At least I'm making a difference instead of sitting around talking about it."

Remus was quiet for a long moment. Then he asked, almost hesitantly, "What about Sirius? Have you told him about all this? About your suspicions regarding Albus?"

Harry's expression softened slightly. "Sirius knows. He's known for a while."

"And?"

"And he's on vacation. Somewhere far from Britain, far from the war. He's suffered enough for an entire lifetime. He deserves some peace, some happiness. A chance to heal from everything he's been through."

"Sirius Black, taking a vacation in the middle of a war?" Remus's voice held a note of disbelief mixed with something that might have been hope. "That doesn't sound like him at all."

Harry actually chuckled at that. "You think convincing him was easy? It took all of us working together to make him see reason. Even then, he only agreed because we pointed out that he'd be more useful alive and recovered than martyring himself in some pointless fight."

"That must have been one hell of a conversation," Remus said, and for the first time since they'd arrived, there was something almost like warmth in his voice.

"It was," Harry agreed. "Lots of shouting. Some threats. A few hexes thrown at his backside for emphasis. Eventually, though, he came around. He's actually doing well, from what I hear. Better than he has in years. He's remembering what it's like to be human instead of just surviving."

Remus nodded slowly, seeming to find some comfort in that information. "I'm glad. He deserves happiness after everything. After Azkaban, after losing James and Lily, after years of suffering and running and hiding. If anyone deserves peace, it's Sirius."

"That's what we told him," Harry said. "And you know what finally convinced him? When I told him that I needed him alive and sane more than I needed another body in the fight. That if he really wanted to help me, he'd take care of himself first."

"That sounds like something James would have said," Remus murmured. "Taking care of each other before anything else."

"My father was smart, then."

Another silence fell, but this one was less tense than before. Finally, Remus straightened, seeming to come to some internal decision.

"I need time," he said. "Time to think about everything you've told me. Time to process it all. This isn't something I can just accept or reject immediately."

"Take all the time you need," Harry said. "Like I said, I'm not asking for an immediate decision. I'm just asking that you think about it. Really think about it, instead of just accepting what you've always been told."

Remus moved toward the door, then paused. "And if the Order does oppose you? If it comes down to a direct conflict?"

"Then I hope you'll choose not to be part of that conflict," Harry said honestly. "But if you do..." His voice hardened slightly. "I won't go down easy. I've worked too hard, come too far to let anyone stop me now. Not Voldemort, not the Death Eaters, and not the Order of the Phoenix."

"I understand," Remus said quietly. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "For what it's worth, Harry, I never wanted things to be like this between us. Between you and the Order. Between you and Albus."

"Neither did I," Harry admitted. "But here we are."

"Here we are," Remus echoed. He looked like he wanted to say more, but couldn't find the words. Instead, he simply nodded to both of them and stepped through the door into the darkening evening.

They heard his footsteps crunch on the gravel outside, then fade into the distance. A moment later, the distinctive crack of apparition told them he was gone.

Harry let out a long breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Nym moved closer, her presence comforting as she hugged him lovingly.

"Well," she said after a moment. "That was intense."

"That's one word for it," Harry agreed, running a hand through her hair.

"He wasn't unfriendly," Nym said thoughtfully. "But I didn't get the sense he'd be a useful ally either. Too conflicted. Too torn between what you told him and what he wants to believe."

Harry nodded. "I understand his position. It's not an easy one."

"You too think he won't do anything?"

"I think he'll struggle with this," Harry said honestly. "Everything I told him conflicts with years of loyalty and gratitude. Dumbledore gave him a lot when no one else would. That kind of debt isn't easy to dismiss, even when faced with uncomfortable truths."

"But you gave him those truths anyway."

"Because he asked," Harry said simply. "And because, despite everything, I think Remus deserves to know. He deserves to make his own choices based on actual information, not just blind faith."

Nym was quiet for a moment. "You know he's going to talk to Dumbledore about this."

"I know. I expected that." Harry turned to face her. "Dumbledore will explain it away somehow. Make it sound reasonable. Paint himself as the tragic hero making impossible choices."

"And Remus will want to believe him."

"Maybe. But at least now there's doubt. At least now he'll be questioning things, seeing patterns he might have missed before. Just hearing my truth was enough to make him notice stuff. That's more than he was doing before."

Nym pulled back and looked up at him carefully. "You're not angry about it. About him not immediately siding with you."

"Why would I be?" Harry asked. "I told him the truth as I see it. What he does with it is his choice. I can't control that, and I won't try to. That would make me no better than Dumbledore, manipulating people into doing what I want."

"Most people would be frustrated. Would want immediate results."

"Most people don't understand what it's like to have your entire worldview challenged," Harry said quietly. "I do. When I first learned the truth about what I am, when I realized what Dumbledore's plan really was, it felt like the ground had been pulled out from under me. Everything I thought I knew, everyone I thought I could trust, it all became questionable. It took time to process that, to accept it, to figure out what I really believed versus what I'd been told to believe."

He gazed down at her tenderly, and pressed a soft kiss on her lips, a kiss she gladly returned. "That's where the idea of this ritual came. Remus is going through something similar right now. Any normal person would struggle with that. Would try to find ways to make it not true, to reconcile the new information with what they already believe."

"You sound almost sympathetic."

"I am," Harry admitted. "Don't get me wrong, I wish he'd immediately see the truth and act on it. But I'm realistic about human nature. People don't just abandon deeply held beliefs overnight. Especially when those beliefs are tied to relationships they value, to their sense of identity and purpose."

Nym reached out, cupping his cheek lovingly. "The truly intelligent person recognizes when to get over that worshipping phase. When to see the truth and decide based on that, not on emotion or past debts."

"True," Harry agreed. "But getting to that point isn't easy. It takes time, self-reflection, and willingness to be uncomfortable. To question yourself and everything you thought you knew. Some people manage it quickly. Others need longer. And some never get there at all, because the alternative is too painful."

"Which one do you think Remus will be?"

Harry considered the question. "Honestly? I don't know. He's conflicted, that much was obvious. He's angry on my behalf, disturbed by what I told him. But he's

also indebted to Dumbledore in ways that go beyond simple loyalty. Those two things are warring inside him right now, and I can't predict which will win out."

"Think he'll cause problems?"

"Maybe. But not immediately. He's too busy processing everything to act right now." Harry moved toward the door. "In a few days, once he's talked to Dumbledore, once he's had time to think things through, then we'll see what he does. Whether he chooses to see the truth or finds a way to explain it away."

"And if he sides against you?"

Harry's expression hardened slightly. "Then he becomes an obstacle like any other. I hope it doesn't come to that. I really do. But I'm prepared if it does."

They stepped out of the Shrieking Shack together, the cool evening air a welcome change from the musty interior. Harry took one last look at the old building, wondering if this would be the last time he'd stand here. So much history in this place, so many memories tied to his father's generation.

But that generation's time was passing. For better or worse, Harry's generation was stepping up to take their place. The question was whether the older generation would accept that transition gracefully or fight it every step of the way.

With Nym beside him, Harry activated their portkey. The familiar pull behind his navel yanked them away from the Shrieking Shack, away from the meeting that might have changed nothing or quite a lot.

Only time would tell which it had been.

Remus apparated to a small clearing outside Hogsmeade, his mind reeling from everything Harry had told him. He stood there in the darkness, trying to process revelations that had turned his entire worldview inside out.

Every year, something had tried to kill Harry. Every year, the boy had faced death, and every year, Albus had been conspicuously absent until after the danger had passed.

It couldn't be coincidence. It simply couldn't be.

"Raised like a pig for slaughter," Remus muttered to himself, and the phrase made his stomach turn.

He'd heard stories about the Dursleys over the years. Little things Albus had mentioned in passing, always with a hint of regret but never with any indication he'd done anything about it. Remus had assumed Harry was safe there, if not happy. But a cupboard? Neglect? Abuse?

And Albus had known. Must have known. He made it his business to know everything important, and surely Harry's wellbeing should have been important.

Unless it wasn't. Unless keeping Harry isolated and desperate had been part of the plan all along.

Remus felt sick.

"For the greater good," he said aloud, and the words tasted like ash.

He'd heard Albus use that phrase before, usually when explaining difficult decisions. Remus had always assumed it meant making hard choices for the benefit of many. But what if it meant something darker? What if it meant deciding who lived and died based on some calculation of value? What if it meant sacrificing individuals for an outcome only Albus could see?

No. He couldn't think like that. Albus had devoted his life to fighting darkness. Everything he'd done, all his sacrifices, they had to mean something.

But Harry's words kept echoing in his mind. "Good intentions don't justify everything."

And the most damning question of all: "If he actually cared about me, he'd have found another way."

Remus needed answers. Real answers, not speculation or assumption. He needed to hear Albus's side of this, to understand what was really going on. To know if the man he'd trusted was capable of what Harry was accusing him of.

Making up his mind, Remus apparated again.

The castle loomed before him, its familiar towers offering none of their usual comfort. Everything looked the same, but Remus felt fundamentally different. Like he'd stepped through some invisible barrier and couldn't go back.

He had to know. Had to understand. Even if the truth destroyed everything he'd believed.

To be continued...