

Skewing the Odds

In the year nineteen ninety-one, high above Hogwarts Castle in the highlands of Scotland, a phenomenal event occurred in the skies which altered the course of wizarding history.

A determined Harry Potter torn through the very fabric of space and time, appearing several hundred feet above the school and promptly found himself on a free falling collision course with the roof of the Great Hall. During his uncontrolled fall from the sky it was only his superb reflexes, conditioned by years of Quidditch and honed through countless battles, that allowed him to save himself.

His arrival created a great splash and many ripples, most probably because he landed with an impressive belly-flop a dozen yards from the shoreline of the Hogwarts lake. The only person more surprised by his unexpected appearance, other than himself, was the giant squid, whose head he had landed upon.

"Goddamn it," he sputtered, coughing up some water. He had been forced to swim several metres up before he had reached the lake's surface. "I bet this is Luna's fault."

After apologising profusely to the disgruntled squid and finally making it to shore, soaking wet and liberally drenched with ink, Harry stealthily made his way into the castle. It was, he felt, an nostalgic experience to see the school once again, especially free of the damage and scars left behind from several of the more impressive battles that had taken place towards the end of the second war against Voldemort.

Carefully, lest anyone detect him, Harry cast a tempus spell. He was more than slightly amazed to discover that he was not only in the right place (ignoring the fact that he had appeared a couple hundred feet above ground) but also at almost the exact right time. In just under twenty-four hours, the students would be arriving on the Hogwarts Express and the school year would begin.

He set to work.

Scurrying as cautiously as possible, Harry quickly made his way to a secure location, which he planned to use as his base of operations during this final mission. By some odd coincidence, he happened to set up shop in the very same bathroom where Hermione had once encountered a mountain troll. Sneaking into the Great Hall would be the greatest challenge of this little adventure, Harry knew. His invisibility cloak, still with him after all these years, would have served well enough against just about everyone in the castle.

Unfortunately, just about would not be enough. He knew for a fact that Professor Dumbledore could see through such cloaks, and several other means of disappearing from sight. For this to work, nobody, not even the headmaster, could know of his presence. This presented a problem that seemed almost impossible to overcome, but Harry had the good fortune to be friends with some of the greatest minds of his generation; most notably Hermione Granger, and to a lesser degree Luna Lovegood. This was not to say that Luna was less intelligent than Hermione, but she did have a tendency to go off on the most decidedly odd tangents at the most inopportune times.

Entering the last stall, after ascertaining that the facilities were not in use, Harry opened the small knapsack he had brought with him and began to disrobe. Quickly shucking off his still damp clothes, he cast two different kinds of Disillusionment Charm and one obscure type of Chameleon Charm on his nude bode. Next he retrieved the special jumpsuit he and his friends had commissioned. Originally it had been his father's invisibility cloak. Now it was an invisibility suit, which hugged his body and covered him from head to toe, thanks to the built in boots and gloves. The last item he donned was a closed hood, made from the same material and with an inbuilt Silencing Charm to mask his breathing.

It was hoped that having so many spells of such a similar nature, coupled with the invisibility suit, would with any luck mean that Dumbledore would not have such an easy time spotting him. Explaining his presence in Hogwarts, not to mention in this time, was not something Harry was eager to do. Not to mention the fact that the headmaster would never allow him to make any of planned changes to the time stream.

Which was why Harry planned to go out of his way to avoid Dumbledore, despite all the multitude of precautions. The only time he actually intended to be in the same room with the old wizard would be during the Sorting, and they had already devised a somewhat ludicrous scheme (based on an idea of Fred and George's) to keep his identity secret.

Piling the clothes he had arrived in with the rest of his equipment, Harry carefully disillusioned the knapsack and hid it atop the toilet's cistern. This was, thanks to the somewhat antiquated design, a good seven feet off the ground, meaning that the only person who might stumble upon it would be Hagrid, and he would have been far too embarrassed to use the ladies room.

All set to begin his machinations to set right what once went wrong, Harry crept out of the bathroom. Making his way through the torch lit corridors, keeping close to the walls and making sure to avoid the more heavily travelled routes, he soon found himself outside the Great Hall. Reaching into a concealed pocket on his left leg, Harry withdrew an Extendable Eye. This was a variant on one of the twins' earlier works, the Extendable Ear. Sliding the implement, which was roughly as thick as a string liquorice, around the corner of the doorframe allowed him to gain a view of what lay within.

Apparently the gods and Merlin were smiling on him this night, for he had arrived during the middle of dinner. Most of the staff were present, discussing the upcoming school year from the sound of things. Dumbledore was not present, fortunately, nor were Professor Trelawney, Professor

Quirrell and Madam Pomfrey. The last three were of little interest to Harry, but the headmaster's absence meant that he could proceed without fear of being detected.

Knowing that he might be needing a distraction later, Harry cast several predetermined charms on a suit of armour that was standing not far from the door. He then slipped into the room and made his way directly to the high table where the professors were dining. Despite the fact that the soles of his feet had been charmed not to make any sound, Harry took care to move with all the stealth and care he could muster.

"I'm telling you, Ponomarev, the boy will be in Gryffindor."

Harry paused to stare incredulously at Professor McGonagall, his former head of house and future headmistress of Hogwarts, following Dumbledore's death six years hence. He simply could not believe that the professors had actually bothered to discuss him, or his possible house placement, before he had even stepped foot in the castle for the first time. Worse yet, they seemed to be arguing over the matter.

"Please," sniffed Professor Sprout dismissively. "If Mister Potter is even remotely like either Lily or James, he'll have more than enough loyalty and just as much willingness to apply himself. A perfect candidate for a Hufflepuff, as you well know."

"Perhaps, but you forget that James Potter and Lily Evans were both Gryffindors," insisted McGonagall.

"Personally, I think he'll do well with my Ravenclaws," input Professor Flitwick, from atop the stack of books which raised him up high enough to reach the tabletop.

Thankful that his invisibility suit would hide his embarrassed blush, Harry moved closer and focused his attention on his target; Professor Snape. The potions master had not deigned to join his fellow professors' conversation, preferring instead to eat his meal in silence, while looking up to cast the occasional sneer (as if he were smelling something repugnant).

"Lily was one of the most intelligent witches of her age, yet she wasn't sorted into Ravenclaw."

"Nor was James and he was just as smart as Lily," insisted Flitwick. "Combining both their intellects would be more than enough to breed a true Ravenclaw."

"The same could be said about their loyalty and determination. Mark my words, you two, young Harry will be a Hufflepuff."

"Honestly, Ponomarev, don't be ridiculous."

"What do you think, Severus? Will Mister Potter perhaps be a Slytherin?"

"Filius!" gasped McGonagall, scandalized.

Snape's sneer had been growing more pronounced as the debate continued. Flitwick's question, however, caused the sallow-faced man's expression to instantly shift to incredulous disbelief. Apparently the possibility of Harry being sorted into Slytherin had never crossed the potion master's mind.

Crouched low before the high table, opposite his intended victim, Harry reached into another concealed pocket, this time by his hip. With the utmost care, he withdrew a small phial of a pale blue liquid. Like most of his equipment, it too had been disillusioned, reducing the chance of discovery.

"Potter? A Slytherin?" asked Snape, literally spitting Harry's name.

Seeing the perfect opportunity, Harry triggered the charms he had set before entering the Great Hall. Outside, the suit of armour toppled to the floor with a resounding crash and clang, amplified by a weak version of the Sonorus Charm, ensuring that those inside the hall could not miss the noise.

"What the devil?" asked McGonagall, rising to her feet.

"Sounds like that blasted poltergeist is causing mayhem again," grumbled Snape.

While all attention was directed across the hall, Harry deftly emptied the contents of the phial he had been holding into Snape's goblet of wine. It had a spicy taste, rather cinnamon-like, and would blend in almost perfectly with the wine's natural flavour. Mission accomplished, Harry triggered the second set of charms, which caused a recording of Peeves's voice to yell out in strident tones.

"Peeves is the best, yes sir-ree! Peeves is the best, that be me!"

"PEEVES!" came a cry from Filch, who had come running to investigate the disruption.

"Blasted poltergeist," confirmed Snape, returning his attention to his dinner.

Harry cautiously departed, waiting by the door only long enough to see Snape pick up his goblet and finish it off in a single long gulp. Once his lips had touched the wine, and the potion mixed in with it, he would be under a compulsion not to stop drinking until the goblet was empty. That was part of a charm placed on the potion he had added, derived from a similar charm that had been used to guard the necklace Voldemort had used for one of his Horuxes.

The purpose of this particular bit of skulduggery was ease Harry's way for his assault against Snape during the follow evening's Sorting. Snape was a master Occlumens and, even after all he had learned over the years, Harry would not have been able to break through his shields without being detected. Crushing his way into Snape's mind, such as the man had done to Harry during their supposed 'lessons', would have been relatively easy, but impossible to cover up.

Which led to the necessity of using an Occlusion Inhibitor Potion. This particular brew would cause Snape's mental shields to weaken, without him realizing it, to the point that Harry would be able to slip in and out without being noticed. The only drawback was that the potion took a good many hours to work and had to be consumed several times before it became properly effected. Harry would have to repeat this twice more, during breakfast the following morning, and again at lunch.

Withdrawing from the Great Hall, almost tripping over Filch in the process, Harry returned to the girls' bathroom and retrieved his gear. From there he made his way to the Room of Requirements, where he planned to spend the night in a room he imagined as being undetectable and inaccessible from the outside.

This was not the end of his work for the night, however. No, Harry still had a fair number of things he needed to do. First and foremost was the Vanishing Cabinet, the one that Montague had gotten lost within during Harry's fifth year. The one that Draco Malfoy had repaired and then used to smuggle Death Eaters into the school.

It took Harry nearly an hour to destroy the Cabinet, mostly due to the fact that he had to be quiet about it.

From there he went to work on the dozen or so other small changes that had to be made. Pages inserted into certain key books within the Restricted Section, care taken so that it appeared they had always been there. Information that would be needed in the years to come would now be much easier to locate. The list went on.

It was well past midnight before Harry finally retired to the Room of Requirement. Despite the security provided by the room itself, as imagined by Harry, he added a plethora of charms and wards designed to mask his presence and prevent the room's accidental discovery while he was using it.

The alarm clock spell he had set before going to sleep woke him at dawn, just as the sun began to creep over the horizon. Knowing that he could not use the Great Hall or the kitchens for food, Harry unshrunk one of the meals he had stored away in his knapsack. It was hardly a banquet, consisting mostly of Muggle energy bars and similar non-perishables, but it was enough to see him through the few days he would need to complete his task.

Leaving the Room of Requirement, once again under various Disillusionment Spells and wearing his invisibility suit, Harry headed down to the dungeons. It did not take long to find Snape, who proved to be an earlier riser. Trailing the man up to the Great Hall, Harry successfully slipped the next dose of the Occlusion Inhibitor into his morning tea, this time using conjured barn owl to cause a distraction.

He repeated this during lunch, despite a close call when Dumbledore had descended from his office to join the staff. Keeping to the far end of the table Harry kept close to the ground, never once lifting his head above the tabletop. This time it was more difficult to sneak the potion dose into Snape's drink, but he eventually managed to do so.

Another problem was Professor Quirrell, who at this point in time had a bodiless Voldemort occupying the back of his head. Unfortunately Harry had not anticipated his scar's reaction to this past version of his mortal foe, and almost gave himself away when a bolt of pain lanced through his head when the Defence professor entered the hall and took his place at the staff table.

"Good afternoon, Professor Quirrell," acknowledged Dumbledore. "I trust you are settling in nicely?"

"N-no puh-puh-problems, headmaster," squeaked Quirrell nervously, though Harry now knew the stuttering was only an act, designed to have people dismiss the man as a serious threat. He briefly contemplated making an attack against him, and by extension Voldemort, but relented to the knowledge that there were some things he simply could not risk changing. Small things, yes; big things, no; was how Hermione had put it.

Repressing a disappointed sigh, despite the fact that there was a Silencing Charm on his hood, Harry returned to the far end of the table once again, still careful to use the tabletop for cover. He would wait until after Dumbledore had left the hall before moving on. Listening to the professors talking was boring, but he was relieved to hear that they were no longer discussing his younger self's imminent arrival.

He spent the rest of the afternoon on the roof of the Astronomy Tower, looking towards Hogsmeade. It was not until he saw approaching lights of the Hogwarts Express in the distance that Harry set to work again. After all, the students would soon be arriving, the first years for their Sorting, and he would need to be inside the Great Hall to accomplish what he needed to do.

Returning inside the castle, Harry pulled out a ball that roughly the size of a Snitch, and set it down on the floor in front of him. Waving his wand over the ball, he released the stasis charm that had been cast over it before he had been transported back through time. He then cast a spell to stir up a barely noticeable, but still fairly strong breeze which sent the subtle smell of *Selena Kyle's Super Deluxe, Extra, Extra Strong Catnip* wafting throughout the castle.

Less than a minute later Mrs Norris came tearing round the nearest corner, her bulging, lamp-like eyes glazed over as she ran directly to the ball of catnip. The wretched feline ignored Harry's presence completely, focusing solely on the irresistible allure of the bait that had reeled her in. She never saw the Stunning Curse which hit her as she purred ecstatically, while rubbing herself against the ball in a provocative manner that nearly upset Harry's stomach.

Harry followed up his Stunner with a full body bind, one which would dissipate several hours later. After returning the catnip to the knapsack, once again under stasis (lest it draw attention from Professor McGonagall), Harry found a nearby broom cupboard that he could hide the insensate Mrs Norris, so that he might go about his business.

Next was the tricky part.

Much to his disappointment, Harry had never managed to achieve the Animagus transformation. He had studied the art, beginning shortly after Dumbledore's death. His attempts, however, had always met with failure - some of them quite spectacular. While being an animagus did not

necessarily have to be a hereditary trait, it appeared that he had not inherited that particular talent from his father.

Still, that did not mean Harry could not become an animal if he wished to. As Barty Crouch Junior had demonstrated during the Triwizard Tournament, whilst disguised as Alastor Moody, transfiguration could do almost as good a job as being an actual animagus. Harry and his friends still laughed occasionally over Draco's Amazing Bouncing Ferret incident.

However, transfiguring yourself into an animal was entirely different from doing it to somebody else. It had taken much practice, drilled into him by Hermione until he had wanted to strangle the bushy-haired witch, but Harry learned how to change his body using directed magic, rather than his own internal magic.

With a shudder of revulsion, the process felt worse than undergoing Polyjuice transformation, Harry transfigured himself into a perfect duplicate of Mrs Norris. It was almost impossible for somebody under such a spell to change themselves back, but Harry had made sure to include a fixed time limit to the change, so that he would return to his natural form in exactly three hours. Checking to see that he had not forgotten anything, and resisting the urge to start licking his fur clean, Harry trotted down the corridor and down to the Entrance Hall.

He arrived several minutes before the first of the students, having been delayed somewhat when one of the staircases had shifted unexpectedly. Most of the older students, in their sixth and seventh years, he did not recognise or even remember. Percy, however, could not be missed. Even at such an early time it was obvious how much he had let the responsibility and power of his position as a prefect go to his head.

The younger years he knew much better, especially his old Gryffindor Quidditch team. Oliver Wood was the first he spotted, followed by Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson. Katie Bell walked in by herself, only in her second year and not yet a member of the team. Fred and George came in last, accompanied by their mate Lee Jordan - who was still showing off the tarantula he now had as a pet.

There were several others he recognised; Penelope Clearwater, Marcus Flint and so forth, but he had not interacted with them as closely as he had with the Gryffindor Quidditch team. His heart gave a tortured pang when he caught a glimpse of Cedric Diggory, happily chatting away with some friends.

"Move along, don't dawdle!" directed Professor McGonagall, waving the children into the Great Hall. "Come on, the first-years will be arriving soon and then the Sorting will begin!"

Finally all off the students were inside and the doors began to swing shut. Harry slipped in before they could close fully, only to find himself uncomfortably close to Argus Filch. The dotting expression on the old man's face was terrifying to be on the receiving end of. Harry was much more used to the caretaker's perpetual scowl - one that rivalled Snape's best.

"There you are, Mrs Norris," Filch cooed, bending down and scooping Harry into his arms before the transfigured wizard could get away. This was almost as traumatic an experience as anything Harry had ever suffered. Especially when Filch began to tickle behind Harry's ears.

Resigning himself to endure this manhandling, Harry settled down and waited. It was not long before the doors to the hall swung open again and Professor McGonagall step in. The first-years dutifully followed behind her, their expressions awed and anxious, not to mention somewhat fearful in some cases.

Seeing the first-years was an even more emotional experience than seeing the older students. Despite the years that had past, he could still recognise all their faces. It was a painful reminder of how costly their victory over Voldemort had been. Fully two-thirds of the young witches and wizards coming to be Sorted would not survive the second war.

He quickly spotted his younger self, short, scrawny and runtish next to a very anxious looking Ron. He remembered that Fred and George had told their younger brother that he had to wrestle a troll for his Sorting. And there was Hermione, standing with one of the Patil twins and Susan Bones. The bushy-haired young girl was explaining how the ceiling had been enchanted to reflect the sky outside.

Malfoy.

The blonde-haired prat was impossible to miss, his hair standing out like a beacon. Crabbe and Goyle, who still seemed impossibly large for their age, flanked him on either side. Oddly enough, almost all of the first-years that would be sorted into Slytherin had congregated around that particular trio. Parkinson. Bulstrode. Nott.

The soft murmurs of the older students died down as Professor McGonagall stepped up and silently placed a stool in front of the first-years. She then revealed the Sorting Hat, patched, frayed and looking all of a thousand years old. Setting the hat down on the stool, she took a step back. Then the hat began to sing, a tear along its rim opening up in parody of a mouth.

*"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see..."*

Harry watched and listened dispassionately as the Sorting Hat sang its song, a much lighter hearted tune than what it had been forced to sing in later years. He hoped that this time round the students would actually listen to its warnings, but he doubted anything would change in that regard.

Professor McGonagall stepped up next to the hat, once the applause was finished, a long piece of parchment in on hand. "When I call your name," she announced stridently, "you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted. Abbot, Hannah!"

Harry watched as old friends and enemies, some still alive, some long gone, stepped up to the stool and were dispatched by the hat to their houses. Hannah, Susan, Terry, Mandy... the list went on. He had to restrain himself from interfering when Bulstrode, Crabbe and Goyle were called up. He was here for a specific purpose, he reminded himself, and it would not do to cause an upset.

The plan had worked up with meticulous detail and he could not risk disrupting it, as that would ruin all of their hard work. He and his friends had a good idea what the changes he intended make this night would bring. They had mapped out the ripples with great care and tossing an extra pebble in the pond would leave them with no idea of what to expect.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Harry watched with a feline smile as his long-time friend almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat on her head. So eager she had been. The years had tempered that, but he could still see the girl being Sorted before him in the Hermione of his own time.

"GRYFFINDOR!" yelled the hat.

Harry had to smirk when he saw how Ron groaned upon hearing this. He wondered what his best friend would say if he were to learn how special the bushy-haired girl would eventually become to them both. The mental image that formed was of Ron bashing his head against the nearest sturdy surface and loudly protesting against the idea.

Neville was next, a quivering wreck if there ever was any. The contrast between the young Longbottom and his future self was a stark reminder of how much life would change them all. After Neville was dispatched to Gryffindor, it was MacDougal, Morag's turn, followed by the primary target of Harry's mission to this time.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

Malfoy swaggered up to the stool, something that looked incredible idiotic to Harry's eye. The young blonde wizard was filled to the brim with cocksure confidence. Harry watched closely, waiting for the time to strike. Malfoy flicked his robes behind him as he settled down on the stool, having given the simple wooden piece of furniture a disdainful sneer before doing so - as if having to sit upon such a thing was simply beneath him.

Professor McGonagall held the Sorting Hat up high and began to lower it. Harry narrowed all of his attention on the hat, every last bit of his magic, and struck. The only sign of his assault was a slight twitch the hat made, just as McGonagall set it down on Malfoy's head.

"Well now, you're an arrogant little shite, aren't you," announced the hat out loud.

Gasps filled the hall at this, the staff and students completely unaware that Harry's focused Legilimency was temporarily overriding the Sorting Hat's consciousness. As far as it was concerned, Professor McGonagall had yet to call out the name of the next student for it to sort - it's mind in a state of suspended limbo, wherein no time would seem to pass. Instead, Harry would speak for the hat, accomplishing the task he had come back for.

"WHAT?!" roared Draco furiously, blushing a shade of red that any member of the Weasley's would have been proud to match.

Harry smirked and prompted the hat further.

"You heard me," said the hat. "A mirror image of you father, that's what you are Master Malfoy. An arrogant little shite, with a head full of nothing more than the idiotic, simple-minded bigotries of a self deluded fool - unwilling and unable to grasp the concept that there is more to magic than blood and birthright."

"You-you-you--" Malfoy sputtered, incoherent with rage.

"Oh, be quiet, you buffoonish offspring of a Death Eater," snapped the hat.

"My father was cleared of all charges!" shrieked Malfoy, quivering furiously and gripping the edges of the stool so tightly that his knuckles could be heard crackle.

"Your father bought his freedom from a corrupt Ministry, you mean," the hat corrected. "Remember what I sang earlier - there's nothing hidden in your mind, a remarkably small place in your case, that I cannot see. You may be able to lie to yourself and everybody else, but you cannot lie to me!"

"When my father hears about this..." Malfoy hissed threateningly, his teeth clenched tight.

"I suspect your father will be more concerned about what I'm about to do to you, Master Malfoy, rather than anything I might say about his character - Death Eater scum and murderer that he may be."

Not for the first time in Harry's experience, Draco's sense of self-preservation kicked in. Instead of making another retort to defend his father's reputation, Malfoy instead asked with a hint of panic, "What d'you mean? What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to see what I can do to reduce your incredibly oversized ego," responded the hat, the mouth-like tear in its brim taking on the appearance of a smirk. "To that end..."

There was a moment of silent anticipation as everyone waited to hear what the hat had planned.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Draco's reaction was exactly as Hermione had predicted. What could be seen of the blonde boy's face, from beneath the hat, immediately paled to almost the exact same shade you'd expect to find in a bed sheet. A moment later Malfoy pulled the hat off and stared at it, his expression the very picture of unadulterated horror. Harry, still controlling the hat, made it give the poor sod a smirk of pure evil. Malfoy grew even paler, if that was possible, then his eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled over in a dead faint.

Calamitous would be the best way to describe everything that followed. Ron was laughing so hard that Harry, both younger and older versions, was

afraid he might rupture something. Some of the Slytherins were on their feet, shouting and yelling in protest, but most of their house were simply sitting in place and staring at the unconscious Draco in utter disbelief. Pansy Parkinson rushed forth, dropping to her knees next to Malfoy and then proceeded to wail like a banshee as she tried to revive him. The Gryffindors, egged on by Fred and George, had started to cheer and applaud, as had several Ravenclaws that knew of the Malfoy reputation. The Hufflepuffs seemed to be frozen in place, petrified with horror.

"WHAT?!?!?"

This was what Harry had been waiting for. Snape had launched himself to his feet, his pallid face drained of enough blood that he was almost as pale as Malfoy. His eyes were wide and somewhat wild as he forced himself around the high table and to Draco's side, where Pansy continued to wail and rock the insensate boy back and forth.

Harry struck.

The Occlusion Inhibitor Potion did its job perfectly. Harry slipped into Snape's mind with next to no difficulty and without the greasy-git noticing him. It was a bit of a problem performing such extensive Legilimency without direct eye contact, but Harry had practiced enough that he could work around it.

Snape reached into his robes, which were billowing ominously despite the fact that he was kneeling, and pulled out a small phial of potion that he immediately forced down Malfoy's throat. He was completely unaware of the machinations Harry was performing, his attention distracted by the task of tending to Malfoy.

Draco's eyes fluttered open. "W-wha? What happened?"

"You had a bit of a shock to the system, Draco," explained Snape. "It was too much for you and you fainted."

"Shock? What shock?"

Magical energy surged along neural pathways, permeating the very fabric of Snape's mind. Memories were skimmed across, perused, modified, re-written, tweaked and in some instances completely replaced or removed. Thought processes were altered and with them attitudes, opinions, biases and outlooks. Long held prejudices and beliefs were adjusted, all carefully aligned so that they would mesh perfectly with the rest of the professor's new psyche.

"You were sorted into Hufflepuff, Draco," said Snape as he helped a very wobbly Malfoy back onto his feet, trying his best to do so despite Pansy's hindering attempts to help.

As his memory reasserted itself, Malfoy grew pale once more and it looked likely that he was about to faint for a second time. Snape, however, held him in a firm grip and managed to keep him upright.

"Hufflepuff? Hufflepuff!" Malfoy sputtered, eyes wide. "One of them? Me? A duffer?"

"Yes, Draco," confirmed Snape. "A Hufflepuff."

"No," Malfoy began to shake his head in denial. "Nononononononononono..."

"Just accept it Draco," counselled Snape, patting the whimpering young wizard on the back. Those of the staff and students that had not been shocked senseless by Malfoy's placement in Hufflepuff, were almost sent into states of catatonia by what the normally dour and waspish professor said next. "I'm proud of you Draco."

"What?" asked Malfoy blinking owlishly up at Snape.

"Yes," confirmed Snape. "Very proud - I simply cannot express the joy I am feeling at this moment."

"Proud? Joy?" Malfoy repeated dumbly.

"Being a Hufflepuff is not something to be ashamed of Draco," Snape explained patiently, his voice modulated just right that everyone could hear him. "Don't flee from yourself. If you have a quality be proud if it, let it define you, whatever it is."

"This has to be a dream - a nightmare!" insisted Malfoy. He looked up at Snape, his expression one of panicked frenzy as he clutched the potion master's robes and demanded, "This has to be a mistake!"

Snape pried Malfoy's hands loose and drew himself up to his full impressive height, his robes billowing around him, and sternly stated, "No, I do not believe that. I've watched you grow up, from a babe to the young wizard you are today, and I can say with absolute certainty and authority that you were born to be a Hufflepuff, Draco. Their qualities shine through the sarcastic and snobbish mask you present to the world, defying your father's dark influence with almost Gryffindor courage!"

This was proving too much for Draco and he had begun to back away from Snape, taking small steps that allowed him to edge away. He shook his head fiercely and protested, "I'm not a duffy Hufflepuff! And I'm not an idiot Gryffindor either! I'm a Malfoy! I'm a Slytherin! From a long line of Slytherins! A Slytherin!"

"Draco--"

"SLYTHERIN! I'M A SLYTHERIN!! D'YOU HEAR ME?!"

"I fear, Mister Malfoy," said Dumbledore, speaking up for the first time, "that the Sorting Hat's decision is final and that there is no appeal. Now, please, join your new housemates at the Hufflepuff table."

Draco froze in place and turned his head, in a tortured motion, to face the Hufflepuff table. He stared across at them. They stared back. It was a clear cut case of mutual dismay at first sight. Malfoy turned back to Dumbledore, his eyes wide and slightly glazed, and shook his head in refusal.

"Now, Mister Malfoy," commanded Dumbledore firmly.

"B-b-buh-but..." Malfoy sputtered.

"Go on, Draco," insisted Snape, giving the blubbering boy a push. "There's a good boy."

Whimpering pathetically, Malfoy began to plod towards his house table. His expression was one of abject wretchedness, the look of a man who no longer had anything left to live for. The expressions on his new housemates was rather similar. In fact, one or two Hufflepuffs seemed to be quietly crying at the injustice of it all. Arriving at the table, Draco stood dumbly in place until Cedric Diggory took pity on the poor sod and dragged him into the seat next to him.

The rest of the Great Hall was utterly still. First a Malfoy sorted into Hufflepuff, then Professor Snape (who had long been acknowledged as a right bastard) acting almost human. It was a bit much to take in and most of the students, and even some of the staff, were wondering when they would be waking up. Even the normally unflappable Dumbledore seemed a bit shaken by these events, though his bright blue eyes were twinkling almost maniacally.

Harry, on the other hand, still held in Filch's tender grip, was delighted. Everything seemed to be going exactly as they had planned. Malfoy had been effectively neutralized, nobody in the school would take him too seriously after this, and Snape had been converted into something approaching a decent bloke. In fact, the potions master would now rather die a painful and messy death before turning on anyone in the Order. He would probably be a bit snarky towards young Harry and his friends, nobody could expect miracles beyond that, but the young Boy-Who-Lived would not have to suffer because of the man's petty grudges against James Potter.

"Professor McGonagall, if you please?" prompted Dumbledore after a while.

"Oh, yes," said McGonagall, looking a tad flustered as she picked up the Sorting Hat from where Malfoy had dropped it. She quickly regained her composure and turned her attention back to the list of students yet to be sorted. "Midgen, Eloise!"

The remainder of the Sorting proceeded without incident, although Harry did find his breath hitching with worry when his younger self sat under the hat. Fortunately things transpired as they had originally, and young Harry found himself being greeted at the Gryffindor table by the ecstatic pair of Fred and George. Not long afterwards he was joined by Ron, whose sorting had been the shortest of all the first-years.

Once the start of term feast had begun and the students were gorging themselves on the bounty of food spread before them, Harry wriggled his way out of Filch's grasp and slinked out of the Great Hall. His business at Hogwarts was concluded, yet his mission in the past was not yet over. He still had to visit several other spots around the country, where many more minor changes here and there were to be made. Privet Drive, the Burrow, Grimmauld Place, Godric's Hollow and the Ministry of Magic to name but a few.

It was said that a well placed pebble could start an avalanche. Those who had survived the second war against Voldemort were now betting on the hope that a hundred other pebbles, exactly placed in just the right spots and at just the right times, would be enough to divert the worst of the metaphorical avalanche.

Possessions reclaimed, in fact nothing more than his clothing and the tools he needed, Harry stole away from Hogwarts and into the night. He still had a job to finish and it would not do for him to tarry overlong at any one place. Besides which, he could scarcely wait to see the Dursleys again. He had a great many specialized Amiability Charms waiting to be used on his dear relatives.

"Heh," he chuckled, looking back over his shoulder at the school. "Mischief managed."

Fin.