

Harry Potter

In the Shadow

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Summary: Going home might not be all it's made out to be. James isn't sure if he'd rather be at Hogwarts this Christmas or not.

James stared at the scarlet train engine, watching the big billows of steam that grew around it, making it seem to float on a cloud, rather than run along the rails, carrying them back to London. It was cold outside, cold enough that he knew if he slipped his hands out of the homemade mittens Grandma had sent him, that his fingers might just freeze to the railing that surrounded the platform in Hogsmeade.

Maybe it wasn't too late. He could just turn around and march back up to the castle, climb into his warm bed in Gryffindor Tower and forget all about this silly trip back home.

Surely they wouldn't miss him—there were enough Weasleys around at Christmas that one less boy in the family would simply not make that much difference.

He was torn, really. Going home was something he'd been looking forward to, until he remembered... *that*.

Surely they wouldn't still be upset about it—it'd been *months* after all. Practically another lifetime ago.

James sighed and lifted a warm, mitten-covered hand to run over his hair, forgetting about the wool hiding his fingers until the softness rested on his head.

"Come on, Potter," Mitch ran past him, nudging his shoulder. "You gonna stand there forever, or get on? If we don't hurry we won't get a compartment all to ourselves."

James nodded, more out of habit than actually agreeing with his best mate. He watched as the troop of Gryffindor boys herded onto the train. He longed to be with them, but the nervousness was getting bigger and bigger inside his belly until he was sure he was going to lose the immense breakfast he'd shoveled into his mouth this morning all over the platform.

"All righ', James?"

Hagrid's friendly voice cut through the icy air, billowing a cloud of steam that seemed to rival the old steam engine. His black and grey tangled beard looked frosted near his mouth, where the moisture was freezing to the hairs. It almost made James smile, but he was afraid it came out more like a grimace.

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Just..."

"Jus' nervous abou' goin' home," Hagrid nodded wisely, resting his massive hand on James' shoulder.

James nodded and shook his head no at the same time. He wasn't sure how much Hagrid knew—probably too much, like usual. Hagrid was always around when James was growing up, sort of an unofficial godfather, really.

"I, er, heard abou' summat tha' migh' have happened a few months back," Hagrid whispered. The

words still carried through the frosty morning. Thankfully James was one of the few left on the platform, along with a couple of older boys further down the train.

He hung his head and scuffed his shoe, wincing when Hagrid patted his shoulder. "It wasn't anything really; just Aimee Jens can't keep her mouth shut."

Hagrid gave a sympathetic nod when James snuck a look at him; it helped James think that maybe he was being a little too sensitive about the whole thing. So what if he'd gotten caught out of the Tower by Professor McGonagall? So what if he'd spent an hour in her office before Nev—er, Professor Longbottom—had finally finished his letter to James' parents? It wasn't like he and Mitch had been doing anything bad; they were just trying to have a little fun. They hadn't even made it far enough into their plans to prank the Slytherins to really get into trouble.

They'd both gotten two nights detention, but it had been Nevi—Professor Longbottom's disappointed look that was the worst. And the glares from Professor McGonagall, who had been forced to take thirty points from her old house.

"Don' worry abou' tha', Jamie," Hagrid said with a deep chuckle. "Yer Mum and Dad are good people. They'll understand."

James gave a doubtful look and sighed, knowing he was going to have to get on the train very soon. The steam billows were growing and he could hear the engine begin to climb in pitch, readying to pull out of Hogsmeade station.

"You jus' tell them the truth an' I'll bet yer Dad will understand. Yer Mum may have more to say abou' it, but she still loves ya."

He nodded and tried to smile his thanks to Hagrid. Somehow, talking with the old half-giant always made James feel better. He remembered his dad saying something like that before too; how Hagrid had his own brand of wisdom that always worked just when you needed it.

"I'll see you for Christmas?" James asked at the last minute, stepping onto the train. He had to yell it over the screech of the wheels that were grinding on the rails beneath him.

"Wouldn' miss it!" Hagrid called out, a jolly laugh filling the air.

Despite what lay ahead of him in London, James couldn't help but smile. Maybe it would be okay, just like Hagrid said.

Mum hadn't even sent a Howler. Mitch's Mum had sent one—it burst into flames and nearly burnt his eyebrows off, right at the breakfast table.

James had waited and watched all day. He was sure his would come in the middle of everything and embarrass him horribly.

But the next day a very carefully worded letter had come, in his father's careful writing. It was reprimanding, but not nearly as angry as James expected. Perhaps that's why he was so worried now. Maybe his Mum and Dad were saving the real fireworks for when he stepped off the train and they saw him again.

Everyone in the family knew what had happened. James' cheeks burned from that thought as he watched frozen Hogsmeade melt into the distance. His Uncles, Ron and George, had sent him a lurid orange envelope that sprayed confetti into the air, shouted "congratulations" before spitting out a chocolate frog at you. They'd invented it just for him, they said, and were now selling them at their shop. A Festive, they called it.

At least it had made him smile, until he realized that his parents must have told the family. If Uncle Ron knew, that meant everyone knew.

"Come on, James," Mitch complained, sticking his head out of the compartment door that James had just walked unknowingly past, "Marcus and Ian are winning. If you don't come in and help me, we'll have no chocolate frog cards left."

The tousled head of dark blonde hair disappeared again into the compartment and James sighed. At least he could force himself to enjoy the ride home. What was coming would come whether he moped about it or not.

* * *

Harry hated crowds. Even after all these years he still hadn't gotten over the fact that people stared at him, some of them even brave enough to approach and ask him to support this cause or that charity. Some of them simply wanted to know if he really was who they suspected he was.

It was all so silly, really. He'd done all of that stuff in the war so long ago that it was now possible for him to go a full day and not even think about it. Now he wasn't Harry Potter, the Chosen One; he was Harry Potter, husband of Ginny Potter, father to James, Al, and Lily Potter. To him, that was the much more preferred title. Well, that and he was the new Head of the Auror Department, but that was simply work.

He'd known the crowd was going to be thick at Kings Cross today. With the Hogwarts Express coming in, lots of families were gathering to welcome their children back home for the holiday.

After talking about it for several hours, he and Ginny had decided it would be best for Harry to brave the peering eyes alone to gather James. Plus, it would give the added advantage of Harry being able to talk with his son uninterrupted for some time.

He sighed and ruffled his hair, trying to ignore the little boy who was inching closer and closer to him, huge dark eyes set into a round, little black face. Inch by excruciating inch, the boy stepped closer until his warm, wiggly body was right alongside Harry's leg.

"You're really him, aren't you?" the boy asked, the widest grin Harry had ever seen splitting his face.

Harry looked down before scanning the crowd for the boy's family. Seeing no one concerned with the little drama playing out in their midst, Harry gave a small nod.

"I really am," he whispered, as if it was the greatest secret in the world.

The boy giggled, a sound that made his whole, skinny body shudder wonderfully. Harry couldn't help

but smile as he rested his hand on the boy's head.

"You look different than in my book, you know," the boy said, peering at him.

Harry glanced around once more, trying not to let his face turn red as people stared at the two. He slowly sank down in front of the boy until they were almost eye level.

"How so?" he asked, curious. He and Ginny had decided long ago—before James was even born—that they would not buy Harry Potter children's books for their kids. Harry wanted to be their dad, not some made up character in some book. And he had enough fantastical stories for them.

"You're a lot taller in the book," the boy shrugged. Tentatively he reached up and laid his dark hand on Harry's cheek. "But you're nicer like this, when you're real."

Harry chuckled and winked. "I like you better real too."

"My sister said you wasn't real," the boy said, pointing back over his shoulder to a little, wide-eyed girl who was clinging to her mother's hand, jumping up and down and pointing in their direction.

"I guess you showed her, didn't you?" Harry asked, lifting his hand and waiving at the girl. She squealed loudly and the mother finally turned, gasping when she saw where her son was.

Harry stood and took the little boy's hand in his, meeting her half-way along the platform.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Potter," she said, looking absolutely horrified and collecting her son up into her arms.

"Its fine," Harry dismissed. "We were just having a little chat. I'm Harry, by the way."

The little family introduced themselves, but the loud sound of the Hogwarts Express pulling up to the platform stole any opportunity to continue the conversation. As the mother walked away, Harry couldn't help but be reminded of James in the young boy he'd just met.

James was always fearless, wandering away to talk with strangers when he was young and scaring the life out of Harry and Ginny. Harry's own natural curiosity had mixed with Ginny's fire and determination, making their son a force to be reckoned with.

The owl from Neville three weeks into term hadn't come as a shock, just a mild surprise. Ginny was surprised it had taken so long for James to get caught, Harry was surprised it was only being out of the Tower he had been caught doing.

While they'd both agreed James needed the discipline, they also both felt he might need a little reassurance. Thus, Harry was alone at Kings Cross.

James was one of the last off the train, making Harry stand through the endless oohing and ahing of the students who recognized him and the ripples of whispers up and down the platform.

No wonder James' letters home had been rather... lacking. They had all the usual lines about how hard Transfiguration was and how James preferred Defense, how he was doing at flying—a natural, of course—and how his friends were. But there seemed to be something missing in the words. It was

almost as if the old James, the one who was full of life and not afraid of anything, had simply fallen asleep.

When James finally stepped down onto the Platform, his rucksack slung over one arm, Harry was shocked at how old he really looked. A vision of this young man, who had been just a child only months ago, as an adult came to Harry's eyes and sucked the breath out of his lungs. The weary look on James' face didn't help Harry picture him as young.

Harry knew being the oldest son of Harry Potter would be hard on James—the first of this generation of Potters to go to Hogwarts—but until this moment, he hadn't really considered the weight on his son's young shoulders.

James glanced around the platform, mumbled his goodbye to the last of his friends and trudged over toward Harry.

"Hi," he said, looking more at Harry's feet than anywhere.

"Have a good trip?" Harry forced himself to ask, swallowing past the lump in his throat.

James lifted his eyes and stared at Harry, the chocolate brown color, so like his mother's, swirling with confusion and hesitation.

"Er... fine. Played Exploding Snap."

"Good," Harry said, pulling James into a rather awkward hug.

"Where's everybody else?" James asked, looking around the platform, as if a whole horde of Weasleys and Potters could hide somewhere.

"At home," Harry shrugged. "I thought you might like to have it be just you and me for a bit."

Rather than be excited at the prospect, James' face fell. "This is where you lecture me about what happened back in September, isn't it?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh as he guided James toward the barrier. "No, it isn't. We'll probably get around to that, but I have a few other things I wanted to talk to you about without your brother and sister around."

"Not even Mum?" James asked as they passed through the barrier and into Kings Cross. Muggles bustled here and there, all oblivious to the two people who melted from the wall and into the flow of traffic.

"Not even your mother," Harry shook his head, "although she knows what I'm going to say."

James looked skeptical still, but he nodded, going along with Harry's plan.

"Where are we going?" he asked finally, blinking as they stepped out into the brighter, grey day.

Harry just smiled and held up a set of keys, jingling them in the air. "I stopped by the Burrow on the way here."

“Because it’s on the way,” James rolled his eyes, but the excitement Harry had been hoping for was now there.

“Everything is on the way when you’re a wizard, James,” Harry leaned over and mumbled, earning a smirk from his son.

“Does Mum know about it this?/i” James asked, his eyes going wide at the car when they stopped in front of it.

Harry laughed. “She does. Just don’t mention it to your Grandmother.” He brushed his hand along the hood of the old Ford Anglia and gestured for James to climb in. “Your Grandfather had to distract her while I backed it out of the shed.”

James stared at all the gauges and dials inside, his eyes going wide. Harry couldn’t help but laugh again, remembering two other wide-eyed young boys who had ridden in a car very much like this one so many years ago.

“Isn’t it your car, though, Dad? You bought it.”

Harry shrugged and turned the key, feeling the engine purr to life. “I did, but it was a gift for your Grandfather. Again—don’t tell your Grandmother that. She thinks I asked Arthur to keep it for me because our house doesn’t have a garage.”

James snorted and shook his head. He reached up and ran his hand along the restored dash. “Will I ever get to drive it?”

Harry laughed as he steered through downtown London traffic. “Maybe one day.”

“But not when I’m twelve,” he grinned mischievously, no doubt remembering the story of Harry and Ron and the adventure they’d gone on.

“Not when you’re twelve,” Harry agreed with a similar smile. “But I thought you at least deserved the first ride in it, besides me.”

James nodded and watched the cars go by. Harry turned the dial on the radio, humming along to an old song on the radio as they made their way out of the city. The quiet moment gave him time to decide how he was going to approach this with James. Even after having weeks to think about what he wanted to say, Harry still couldn’t find the perfect words.

“How is Hogwarts?” he finally settled on.

James was quiet for a minute, biting the inside of his cheek. “Just... just say what you want to say, okay, Dad?”

Harry cleared his throat and took a sharp left, down a street that seemed to be a dead end. Instead of stopping, however, he gunned the engine and punched a button on the dash.

James gasped and clutched the door as they lifted into the air.

“Don’t worry, Arthur and I checked and re-checked the invisibility booster. No one can see us.”

"It's not that," James panted, staring at the city growing smaller below them. "I just... it took me by surprise."

Harry laughed softly and patted his son's shoulder, gently turning the wheel to lead them southwest, through the moist clouds toward home.

"Listen, James," he started, hating the way this was turning out to be a lecture. It was what he wanted to avoid, really. He reached over and clicked the dial to the radio until the voices faded from the speakers completely.

James took a deep breath and seemed to brace himself.

"It can't be easy being my son," Harry sighed. He stared straight ahead, knowing that if he looked at James he might not be able to do this. "There are... expectations that people have of you. Expectations that maybe you have for yourself that are... Well they might be unreachable."

"Not... not really," James shrugged, lying. Harry appreciated the effort.

"Your mother and I tried very hard not to let the stories and the fame touch you when you were little."

"It didn't," James shook his head, "not really. I mean, we knew who you both were, but..."

"Yeah," Harry shifted in the seat, ruffling his hair in annoyance and nervousness. "What I'm trying to say is, your mother and I love you, James. We don't want you to be anyone but yourself. Okay?"

"Er... okay?" James looked more than a little confused and Harry had to look away from him, reminded of the little boy who was bold and daring. The boy who used to hate getting dressed, preferring to run around nude, or in only his Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle underpants all day long. Where had those years gone?

"This isn't about September?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not really, although what happened in September made us realize how much pressure you might be under at school. We've never wanted anything more for you, Jamie, than to be a happy, healthy young boy who was given the best of what we could give you."

"You've given me that," James protested. "Given us all that."

"Good," Harry nodded. "That's the most important thing."

"I just... sometimes I see people watching me," James admitted, his voice softer than Harry thought he'd ever heard it. James didn't know how to be quiet; he had two volumes—loud and asleep. "And I know they're waiting for me to do something spectacular because my name is—"

"Potter," Harry finished, nodding.

James shrugged awkwardly, his cheeks going red, just like his mother's used to do. "And I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"You're not," Harry shook his head. "You're eleven years old, James."

"Almost twelve," James pouted softly, making Harry smile.

"Almost twelve years old," Harry corrected. "You're allowed to make mistakes, you know? You're allowed to have the chance to grow up and decide who you want to be in life."

"I'm allowed to get caught out of bed and get detention?" James asked hopefully.

Harry tried not to smile; he really tried. "You're allowed to be eleven—almost twelve."

James' whole body seemed to relax back into the seat and he rested his head against the seat, a look that was completely the old James coming back onto his face.

"That doesn't mean you should be out every night, trying to get yourself into as many detentions as you can possibly gather," Harry warned, a flash of memory coming over him. He was sixteen, and in another of his series of detentions given by Professor Snape, dusting cards that had his father's name all over them. James Potter. Right now he couldn't help but think the man he'd named his son for would be smiling somewhere, proud of his namesake.

"It just means that mischief and curiosity have their place," Harry finished. They were quiet for a few more minutes, fluffy white clouds passing them as the engine whined perfectly in the background.

"Do me a favor?"

James perked up, blinking at Harry. "Yeah?"

"Reach into the back seat," Harry nodded his head to the side. "There's something for you back there."

"For me?" James asked, practically diving over the seat. He returned with a rather lumpy package, wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with a string.

"For you," Harry nodded. "Now before you open it—"

"Wait!" James commanded, holding up his hand. "It's not Christmas yet. If Mum finds out—"

Harry laughed. "Your mother and I have discussed giving this to you long and hard. And you know when we finally decided it was the right time?"

James stared at him, the package in his lap momentarily forgotten. He shook his head slowly.

"In September," Harry shrugged. "Open it and I'll try to explain."

James barely took a breath before ripping into the paper, strewing it everywhere across the floorboards of the car. Harry didn't watch, but waited for the sound of an intake of breath. He wasn't disappointed by the gasp that echoed.

"It's... is this the *real* one?"

"It is," Harry nodded, glancing over to see James eyes wide, his fingers reverently letting the cloth slide over his fingers.

"But... don't you need this? For work, I mean," James asked. He slid his hand into the cloak and lifted it, marveling when his hand disappeared into the silvery material.

Harry shrugged. He had been using it periodically at work, but the need was greater here. Plus, it was time to carry on with tradition. "I can manage without it."

"Why are you giving this to me?" James peered at him. "Especially after Mitch and I got into trouble."

"Your mother and I talked about it, like I said," Harry explained. "And we almost decided against giving it to you, but the way you handled everything, James, the way you didn't get angry with the punishment or fight against it, showed real maturity. I'm not naive enough to think that this was the only time you've been out of Gryffindor Tower, or that just getting caught would deter you. But maybe with this, you'll be less likely to get stuck in detention. However, if we think that you're misusing it—"

"I won't," James promised, a smile splitting his face. Harry couldn't hide his own happiness at the look of pure joy on his son's face.

"That was given to me Christmas of my first year, you know?" Harry asked, his mind thick with memories. It felt like just days ago that he'd been sitting on the end of his bed in the dormitory, marveling at the fact that he had presents sitting there, just for him.

"It's sort of a... family tradition to hand it down to sons."

James' smile slipped off his face as he stared at the cloth. "What about Al, Dad? You have two sons."

"I do," Harry nodded proudly. "I'm giving this to my son now, and I'll tell Albus about it Christmas of his first year. That gives you two years to make good use of it before you'll have to share it."

James nodded and was quiet. "If you want it back then, I'll understand."

"Not at all," Harry shook his head. He knew that James often felt left out because Harry and Albus shared a sort of bond between them. James, while looking similar to Harry, looked more like a Weasley. Albus was almost the spitting image of Harry, while Lily was a blend of her two parents. "I'll expect both of my sons to share that cloak responsibly."

James' smile returned, a little less bright, but growing by the minute. "I wanted to be in Gryffindor to make you proud."

"You know that I would have been proud of you even if Hogwarts had shut its gates on you, right?" he winked.

James nodded, his face going pink. "But I didn't make the Quidditch team like you did."

“James—”

“And there haven’t been any trolls, or possessed professors, or even enchanted books. Just boring stuff.” He sounded almost disappointed and Harry winced, thinking that perhaps the stories had been too much after all.

“Good,” he nodded. “I’ve worked hard all my life to make sure those things don’t happen to you, Jamie.”

“I just want to make you proud of me,” James said. “To be like you.”

Harry swallowed past the lump in his throat and pulled James across the seat to hug him with one arm. “I am proud of you, James. But you should want to be your own person. You’re not Harry Potter—you’re James Sirius Potter, and there’s never been another you. You need to learn to be who you are, and not who everyone else expects you to be.”

James hugged him back, caught up in the moment and forgetting completely that almost-twelve year-old boys rarely hug their parents. He nodded finally and moved away a little, staring down at the cloth and tracing his fingers along the folds and ripples in it.

“I’ll figure out who that is, I promise.”

“That’s enough for us,” Harry nodded. “Look, we’re pulling in now,” he pointed out the window to the home that had become his sanctuary over the years.

“Home,” James said, his forehead pressed on the glass. “It’s good to be home.”